



Wilfried
Martens Centre
for European Studies

The Strategic Compass

Charting a New Course for
the EU's Security and Defence Policy

Niklas Nováký



Summary

December 2020

The EU has embarked on a process to develop a 'Strategic Compass' for its security and defence policy. This two-year process began in June 2020 and will conclude under the French EU Council Presidency in spring 2022. A German initiative, it is meant to narrow the gap between ambition and reality when it comes to the Union's external action; facilitate the development of a shared strategic culture; and clarify the overall image of EU defence cooperation that Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the European Defence Fund (EDF), the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) and other post-2016 initiatives have created. Broadly speaking, the Strategic Compass seeks to boost the EU's ability to navigate through international challenges. It is driven by the member states and the European External Action Service (EEAS), with the involvement of the Commission and the European Defence Agency (EDA). To be successful, the Strategic Compass process has to be as concrete as possible in outlining how the EU should handle even its most difficult challenges. A compass is only useful if it can tell the navigator where north is. Likewise, for the Strategic Compass to be successful, the EU needs to set a clearly defined strategic north.

Keywords Strategic Compass – Global Strategy – Strategic autonomy – Ability to act – Security – Defence



Introduction

In June 2020 the EU embarked on a two-year process to develop a ‘Strategic Compass’ for its security and defence policy. This German initiative is meant to boost the EU’s ability to manage and navigate through international challenges. More specifically, the Strategic Compass is meant to make the EU’s ambitions in the field of security and defence more concrete, as outlined in the 2016 *EU Global Strategy* (EUGS) and the related *Implementation Plan on Security and Defence* (IPSD), and to provide additional guidance to the Union’s military and strategic levels. As Josep Borrell, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP), has noted, the EU is developing the Strategic Compass because ‘Europe must develop its own framework for monitoring and analyzing threats, so that it can move quickly from threat assessment to operationalization and response.’¹ In a way, the EU has already developed this framework via the comprehensive threat analysis that was prepared by the European External Action Service (EEAS) and presented to the member states’ defence ministers on 20 November. This threat analysis will serve as the basis for the Strategic Compass.

The Strategic Compass may help the EU become a more effective international actor for two main reasons. First, it will inject into the system of EU defence cooperation a new dose of political direction that will guide its development until 2025–30. This direction has been somewhat missing from EU defence cooperation because the EUGS and the IPSD were not formally adopted by the member states, which simply took note of them. The Strategic Compass, however, will be adopted by the member states, giving the final product substantial political weight. Second, the Strategic Compass will provide further guidance to the member states’ military planners. Despite the EUGS and the IPSD and processes such as the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), the relevance of the EU’s ambitions to national defence planners has been unclear at best. The Strategic Compass seeks to remedy this. To get the most out of the process, the EU should ensure that the Strategic Compass does not focus too heavily on technical topics such as capability development priorities and targets in the framework of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)—there are already processes in place for this (i.e. CARD and the PESCO Strategic Review). The Strategic Compass should mainly provide answers to political questions concerning the future of EU security

¹ J. Borrell, ‘European Strategic Complacency Is Not an Option’, *Project Syndicate*, 13 November 2020.



and defence cooperation: What kind of a security and defence actor does the EU want to become? What role should the EU play in the protection of the Union's citizens and territory? How should the challenges posed by Russia and China be handled? If it succeeds, the Strategic Compass could add real value by increasing the level of agreement among the member states on the big picture.

The Strategic Compass process has already received attention from think tankers across the EU.² This paper seeks to contribute to the emerging literature on the initiative. It is primarily based on publicly available primary sources such as official documents, recordings of meetings and newspaper articles. It also uses data from five semi-structured interviews that the author conducted in September–November 2020 with EU and national officials involved in the Strategic Compass process. These interviews were conducted under the Chatham House Rule, which means that neither the names nor the affiliations of the interviewees can be revealed.³ The rest of the paper is divided into five sections. The first explains how the idea of the Strategic Compass came about and how it found its way on to the EU's agenda. The second explains the purpose and objectives of the initiative. The third explains the process and timeline for developing the Strategic Compass. The fourth provides recommendations on issues that should be taken into account in 2021 when the Strategic Compass is drafted. The fifth and final section concludes the paper.

Background

The Strategic Compass is a German initiative. It was listed as a priority in the programme for Germany's autumn 2020 EU Council Presidency.⁴ In the run-up to this Presidency, Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union of

² See, e.g., S. Biscop, 'From Global Strategy to Strategic Compass: Where Is the EU Heading?', Egmont, Security Policy Brief no. 121 (December 2019); D. Fiott, 'Uncharted Territory? Towards a Common Threat Analysis and a Strategic Compass for EU Security and Defence', EU Institute for Security Studies, Brief 16 (July 2020); N. Koenig, *The EU's Strategic Compass for Security and Defence: Just Another Paper?* Hertie School, Jacques Delors Centre, Policy paper (10 July 2020); L. Scazzieri, 'Can the EU's Strategic Compass Steer European Defence?', Centre for European Reform, *CER Bulletin*, Issue 134 (October/November 2020); C. Major and C. Mölling, *Europe, Germany and Defense: Priorities and Challenges of the German EU Presidency and the Way Ahead for European Defense*, Fondation pour la recherche strategique, Note no. 63/20 (13 October 2020); C. Mölling and T. Schütz (eds.), *The EU's Strategic Compass and Its Four Baskets: Recommendations to Make the Most of It*, German Council on Foreign Relations, DGAP Report no. 13 (November 2020).

³ Chatham House, 'Chatham House Rule' (n.d.).

⁴ Germany's Presidency of the Council of the EU, 'Together for Europe's Recovery: Programme for Germany's Presidency of the Council of the European Union – 1 July to 31 December 2020' (n.d.), 24.



Germany (Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands, CDU) had called for the development of an EU White Book, a document that would outline the Union's interests and ambitions in the security and defence field.⁵ During its 2019 party congress in Leipzig, for example, the CDU noted that the White Book must set forth a set of common EU interests, a defence strategy and the capabilities that the member states should jointly develop.⁶

The German Federal Ministry of Defence, under the leadership of a member of the same party, supported a similar position when the security and defence priorities for Germany's EU Council Presidency were being planned. However, the ministry used different terminology: rather than speaking of an EU 'White Book', it advocated developing a 'Strategic Concept' that would clarify the threats and challenges that the EU faces and facilitate the emergence of a shared strategic culture. 'Strategic Concept' eventually morphed into 'Strategic Compass' because the ministry considered the latter more reflective of the aims of the initiative.⁷ In addition, some were uncomfortable with the term 'Strategic Concept' because it was considered too ambitious and too much like existing NATO terminology.⁸ In November 2019 German Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer explained that, during its Council Presidency, Germany wanted 'to provide a Strategic Compass' for the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) to 'clearly identify the direction in which we Europeans want to go, and how to get there.'⁹ According to Kramp-Karrenbauer, the document would be 'a compass for a confident European Defence Union', the term that is sometimes used to explain to the general public the EU's ongoing efforts to strengthen cooperation in security and defence.

As a topic of discussion, the Strategic Compass penetrated the Brussels bubble in late 2019. Given that 'Strategic Compass' is not an established term in EU politics or in international strategic studies, it was initially unclear what the initiative would do. For example, would it replace the EUGS?¹⁰ Another reason for the

⁵ CDU, 'Für ein Europa der Sicherheit' (6 June 2018).

⁶ CDU, *Sonstige Beschlüsse des 32. Parteitags der CDU Deutschlands*, 32nd party convention of the CDU of Germany, held at Leipziger Messe on 22–3 November 2019, 18.

⁷ Interview conducted by the author, November 2020.

⁸ Since its creation in 1949, NATO has published several Strategic Concepts, the latest one in 2010. A NATO Strategic Concept is an official document that outlines the Alliance's purpose, nature and tasks. It also identifies features of the organisation's security environment, specifies NATO's approach to security and provides military guidelines. For more information, see NATO, 'Strategic Concepts' (24 September 2020).

⁹ A. Kramp-Karrenbauer, 'Speech by Federal Minister of Defence at the Bundeswehr University Munich', speech given on 7 November 2019, German Federal Ministry of Defence website.

¹⁰ EU, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe – A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy* (June 2016).



lack of clarity was that the EU was about to change leadership, and some had argued that Josep Borrell, the new HR/VP, should launch a process that would lead to an updated EUGS. However, it eventually became clear that the EUGS would not be replaced and that the focus of the Strategic Compass would be narrower: it would clarify how the security and defence aspects of the EUGS could be further operationalised and implemented. In November the EU Institute for Security Studies (ISS), working with the Finnish Council Presidency and the Croatian Presidency that followed it, organised a seminar on EU security and defence cooperation. At the seminar it was underlined that the Strategic Compass ‘should focus first on an EU threat assessment, then moving on to clearly define “European strategic autonomy” and indicators to measure it, as well as deciding on a concrete level of ambition for autonomous EU action.’¹¹

Several member states, including France, were initially sceptical about the idea of producing the Strategic Compass. This was due to their concern that the Compass might end up becoming just another document in the EU’s already extensive arsenal of security and defence documents, and would not lead to concrete improvements in the area.¹² There was also a lack of clarity on what the Strategic Compass would look like and concern that it might become as broad as the EUGS. However, France’s position has changed. Given that it was an initiative of the German Presidency and would continue on into 2022, when France would have the Presidency, Paris thought that the initiative could help create synergies between the two Presidencies in the security and defence field. France also felt that the Strategic Compass could help fine-tune the new capability development initiatives that have emerged since 2016. Finally, France also saw that the Strategic Compass could be used not simply to make existing initiatives more coherent but to put new ideas on the Council’s agenda.

The Strategic Compass process was formally launched by EU defence ministers at a Council meeting on 17 June 2020. The Council invited HR/VP Borrell to present a separate threat analysis by the end of the year. The idea was that he would provide background for the member states to develop ‘a Strategic Compass document to be adopted by the Council in 2022’ under the French Council Presidency.¹³ This threat analysis, which was presented to EU defence ministers on 20 November, will be discussed in more detail below. In addition to the member states and the EEAS, the European Commission and the European

¹¹ EU Institute for Security Studies, ‘Continuity and Change in European Security and Defence? A Discussion with Finland and Croatia’, Report (15 November 2019), 2.

¹² Interviews conducted by the author, October–November 2020.

¹³ Council of the EU, ‘Council Conclusions on Security and Defence’, 8910/20 (17 June 2020), 3.



Defence Agency (EDA) will ‘be associated as appropriate in the process’.¹⁴ This is because both the Commission and the EDA are major actors in the area of EU security and defence cooperation. The Commission is in charge of the European Defence Fund (EDF) and Military Mobility, whereas the EDA functions as the secretariat for both PESCO and CARD, in addition to its other activities. The European Parliament will not have a direct role, although officials have explained to the author that it will be regularly updated and given opportunities to express its opinions on the Strategic Compass process, for example, during briefings to its Subcommittee on Security and Defence (SEDE).¹⁵

Purpose

The Council conclusions of 17 June outline four aims for the Strategic Compass.¹⁶ First, it should ‘enhance and guide’ the implementation of the level of ambition outlined in the November 2016 IPSD, which had been agreed in the context of the EUGS.¹⁷ When it comes to the EU’s external action, there continues to be a gap between ambition and reality, especially in the area of crisis management. The EU is often slow to respond when a crisis erupts in its neighbourhood. This is due in part to long CSDP planning processes but even more to the member states’ unwillingness to contribute forces and capabilities to planned operations. In addition, some conflicts and crises fall de facto outside the EU’s area of responsibility due their intensity and the sensitivities involved. Protecting the European homeland has been an EU ambition only since 2016. It requires further clarification, not least because most member states, are also NATO allies and see it primarily as the Alliance’s responsibility. However, the EU treaties contain provisions for solidarity and mutual assistance (i.e. Article 222 TFEU and Article 42(7) TEU). Countries such as France and Finland would like to develop these further, including in the context of the Strategic Compass process. In addition, the ongoing coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has highlighted the need to strengthen the EU’s competences in areas such as health security, security of supply and strategic stockpiling.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Interviews conducted by author, October–November 2020.

¹⁶ Council of the EU, ‘Council Conclusions’, 3.

¹⁷ The IPSD states that the EU must be able to contribute to (a) responding to external conflicts and crises, (b) building the capacities of partners and (c) protecting the Union and its citizens (Council of the EU, *Implementation Plan on Security and Defence*, 14392/16 (14 November 2016), 2).



Second, the Strategic Compass ‘could further contribute to develop the common European security and defence culture’, which needs to be informed by shared values and objectives.¹⁸ Borrell has noted that, at the moment, the EU primarily needs a common strategic culture, that is, ‘a common way of looking at the world, of defining threats and challenges as the basis for addressing them together.’¹⁹ EU member states have different threat perceptions with regard to, for example, Russia, Turkey, the Sahel or the Arctic. Rooted in geography and history, these differences often complicate collective foreign, security and defence policymaking. The same also applies to NATO, of course. However, the Alliance has been able to mitigate these differences through the traditionally strong leadership role exercised by the US. There are also commonalities in the member states’ threat perceptions: most of them agree that their security is threatened by cyberthreats and hybrid threats, organised crime, weapons proliferation and violent conflicts.²⁰ The EEAS threat analysis that was presented to EU defence ministers on 20 November was meant to clarify the threats that are undoubtedly common to the member states and in this way create a foundation on which the Strategic Compass could improve the EU’s ability to respond to and address them.

Third, and most concretely, the Strategic Compass ‘will define policy orientations and specific goals and objectives in areas such as crisis management, resilience, capability development and partnerships’.²¹ These are the four thematic clusters of the Strategic Compass, to each of which corresponds a working group. It is within the framework of these clusters that the actual priorities, goals and policies will be developed. The aim is to enable the EU to determine which capabilities it requires to fulfil its level of ambition in the area of security and defence, and which priorities the member states should—or should not—pursue collectively. The COVID-19 pandemic has made it clear that if the Union’s crisis resilience is to be enhanced, the level of solidarity within the EU has to be improved. In addition, cyberattacks and ongoing tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean have highlighted the need to further clarify and operationalise Article 42(7) TEU. Some member states, such as Finland, are hoping to discuss this issue in the context of the resilience cluster. However, the discussion may take place at a later stage. This is because some member states are unwilling to discuss the topic as they are worried that this

¹⁸ Council of the EU, ‘Council Conclusions’, 3.

¹⁹ J. Borrell, ‘Europe Security and Defence: The Way Forward’, EU External Action Service, A Window on the World (blog), 21 June 2020.

²⁰ Fiott, ‘Uncharted Territory?’, 6.

²¹ Council of the EU, ‘Council Conclusions’, 3.



could touch upon collective defence and thereby create uncomfortable parallels with NATO's Article 5.

Fourth, the Strategic Compass should also 'provide a coherent guidance' both for the EU security and defence initiatives that have emerged since 2016 and for other relevant processes.²² These initiatives include PESCO, the EDF, CARD, the European Peace Facility (EPF) and Military Mobility. There is a need to clarify the broad overall picture of EU security and defence cooperation that has emerged from these initiatives. Moreover, these initiatives should be connected more explicitly to the EUGS and to the IPSD. Further still, strategic direction needs to be provided for their future development: agreement has to be reached on additional EU capability R&D targets and goals for the future. As noted above, the EU already has processes in place for this, namely the Capability Development Plan (CDP), the PESCO Strategic Review and CARD. However, EDA Chief Executive Jiří Šedivý and Timo Pesonen, Director-General for the European Commission's DG Defence Industry and Space (DEFIS), have stated that the Strategic Compass could help the EU further clarify its strategic priorities and capability needs.²³ CARD and the PESCO Strategic Review will guide this effort by informing the forthcoming work on the capabilities and instruments cluster.

Development

The development of the Strategic Compass began with the preparation of a separate '360 degrees analysis of the full range of threats and challenges' that the EU is likely to face until 2025–30.²⁴ The analysis, which is confidential and distinct from the Strategic Compass, was prepared by the EEAS Single Intelligence Analysis Capacity (SIAC)²⁵ on the basis of input that the member states' national civilian and military intelligence services had provided in the period running up

²² Ibid.

²³ European Parliament, Subcommittee on Security and Defence, Multimedia Centre (30 December 2020, 13:45–15:45).

²⁴ Council of the EU, 'Council Conclusions', 3.

²⁵ The SIAC combines the EU's civilian intelligence arm (the EU Intelligence and Situation Centre, EU INTCEN) and its military intelligence arm (EU Military Staff Intelligence Directorate). It uses both civilian and military contributions to produce intelligence assessments for EU entities and national capitals. See, e.g., R. Bossong, *Intelligence Support for EU Security Policy: Options for Enhancing the Flow of Information and Political Oversight*, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, SWP Comment no. 51 (December 2018).



to the end of September 2020.²⁶ In addition, the EU Satellite Centre (SatCen) provided ‘both illustrative and informative images’ for the analysis.²⁷ In October the SIAC aggregated the approximately 500 contributions it had received and drafted the threat analysis. This analysis was then presented during a video conference of EU defence ministers on 20 November.²⁸ However, the Council did not formally ‘endorse’ the document—it simply ‘took note’ of it.²⁹ This is because the EEAS wanted to produce a non-politicised, factually correct assessment of the various threats and challenges the EU is facing and will face in the next 5 to 10 years, which would act as the foundation on which the Strategic Compass itself would be built. Getting the Council’s endorsement would have required long debates in the relevant committees over the prioritisation and hierarchy of different threats. This would have delayed the process and made it likely that the end result would have been reduced to the lowest common denominator.³⁰

The Strategic Compass itself will be developed mainly in 2021. In the first half of the year, the member states will engage in strategic dialogue to assess their key needs and the main implications of the threat analysis, as well as the policy guidelines that arise from this analysis. More specifically, they will discuss (1) the threat analysis, (2) a capability gap analysis and (3) the member states’ priorities. According to Major and Mölling, the gap-analysis was prepared by the EU Military Staff (EUMS) with the consent of the EU Military Committee (EUMC). EU military bodies can use this document to ‘bring up those questions for which they would like to have political guidance.’³¹ Presumably, it will be informed by the CDP, CARD

²⁶ On 16 November 2020, Vice Admiral Hervé Bléjean, Director General of the EU Military Staff, told the European Parliament’s SEDE that the EEAS had sent a threat survey to all of the member states’ civilian and military intelligence services (92 in total). Three member states—France, Germany and Portugal—compiled the contributions from different agencies and gave a single national response to the survey. Others provided the contributions of their different agencies separately. For a recording of the meeting, see European Parliament, Committee on Security and Defence, Multimedia Centre (16 November 2020, 10:00–11:00).

²⁷ EEAS, ‘Questions and Answers: Threat Analysis – A Background for the Strategic Compass’, Memo (20 November 2020).

²⁸ In November 2020 the EEAS published ‘Questions and Answers’, a sanitised three-page overview memo on the threat analysis. The memo notes that the analysis ‘covers strategically relevant threats and challenges that the EU and its Member States will face without their prioritisation, focusing on global trends and risks, regional trends and risks as well as threats to EU security and interests.’ The analysis ‘does not provide a worldwide overview of all the crises and challenges, but analyses those threats and challenges that affect the Union’s security as well as its interests the most.’

²⁹ Council of the EU, ‘Video Conference of Defence Ministers’, Meeting no. VC-DEFENCE-1120 (20 November 2020).

³⁰ Interviews conducted by the author, October–November 2020.

³¹ Major and Mölling, *Europe, Germany and Defense*, 8–9.



and the PESCO Strategic Review. The final Strategic Compass ‘should then offer answers to the questions realised in the gap analysis’.³²

The EEAS is hoping to present an outline of the Strategic Compass to the member states as early as January 2021. This is to include the topics the Compass will focus on. However, it is unclear to what extent the threat analysis will actually provide a framework for discussions carried out by the member states, especially since it has not been endorsed by the Council. Although the analysis will certainly have an impact on every discussion in every cluster, an unexpected crisis could erupt during the Strategic Compass process. This might completely change the Union’s threat perception and prioritisation, much like Russia’s annexation of Ukraine’s Crimea region did in 2014. In such a situation, the member states would almost certainly not stick to the analysis. Moreover, at the time of writing, it has not been formally decided how work on the four Strategic Compass clusters will move forward—that is, whether the clusters will be worked on in sequence or in parallel. A sequential order could complicate the process, as some member states could make it hard to move from one cluster to another if they felt that their priorities had not been sufficiently addressed in a given cluster. In November the author was told that a parallel working order is the likeliest.³³

In the second half of 2021, a coherent framework will be developed for the Strategic Compass. During this period the document setting forth this framework will be drafted based on the strategic dialogue mentioned above, and consensus will be built among the member states on the remaining sticking points. The EEAS wants to have a well-developed draft of the Strategic Compass prepared and presented to EU defence ministers by the HR/VP for further discussion by November 2021. Early in 2022 it will be submitted to the member states’ ambassadors at the Political and Security Committee (PSC) for final examination. The Strategic Compass will be adopted by the Council in the first half of 2022, during the French Council Presidency. Unlike the threat analysis, the Strategic Compass will be a public document that will be adopted by the member states.

The Strategic Compass process and the planned Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) have similar time frames: work on both was meant to start in autumn 2020, during Germany’s Presidency, and will conclude in spring 2022, at which time the Presidency will be held by France. There are no formal links between the Strategic Compass and the CoFoE, and not all member states see them as connected. However, EU officials and national diplomats explained to the author that

³² Ibid.

³³ Interview conducted by the author, November 2020.



France and Germany in particular see the Strategic Compass as a type of ‘second pillar’ to the CoFoE since both of them seek, broadly speaking, to enhance the EU’s ability to respond to current and future challenges. In other words, although their focuses are different and the CoFoE will be much more visible in the European public domain since it also involves EU citizens and civil society actors, the two serve a similar overall purpose. At the time of writing, it is not expected that the CoFoE would involve discussions on the future of EU security and defence cooperation that are similar to the ones to be held in the context of the Strategic Compass process.

Recommendations

Several recommendations can be provided for the drafters of the Strategic Compass. The first concerns expectations management. The EU should avoid setting unrealistically high targets for the Strategic Compass process, such as claiming that it will facilitate the emergence of a shared strategic culture. The EEAS’s threat analysis, on which the Strategic Compass will be built in 2021, was in itself a valuable exercise because it allowed the EU to take stock of the different threats and challenges that the member states would like the Union to focus on. However, due to these countries’ different locations, histories and dependencies, a genuinely shared strategic culture will not be attainable during the planned life cycle of the Strategic Compass (i.e. in 2022–30). Achieving this would require a much longer period of time, and it might never happen if EU foreign, security and defence policies remain intergovernmental in character. To increase the chance that a shared strategic culture would eventually emerge, the Strategic Compass could also seek to create synergies with the French-led European Intervention Initiative (EI2), which has this same goal.³⁴

The second recommendation builds on the first. Rather than seeking to develop a shared strategic culture, the Strategic Compass should be used primarily to highlight overlaps in the member states’ threat perceptions, based on their contributions to the EEAS threat analysis. Such overlaps could be used to operationalise subgroups of member states to address specific challenges that are of particular concern to them. In 2020 the Baltic states, and Lithuania in particular, took a visible leadership role in driving the EU’s Belarus policy. The Strategic

³⁴ The EI2 is a non-EU European forum for intergovernmental security and defence cooperation between France and 13 of its European partners. It seeks to facilitate the development of a shared strategic culture among the participating countries to boost Europe’s effectiveness as a crisis manager and to increase contacts and interactions between their defence ministries and armed forces.



Compass could seek to further operationalise this delegation model, which is based on a more active use of coalitions of the willing within the EU. This could boost the effectiveness of the EU's external action, especially since the member states are currently against even a limited extension of qualified majority voting to foreign policy issues.³⁵ This delegation model could be seen as a softer form of qualified majority voting, as former HR Javier Solana noted in December 2020.³⁶

Third, there needs to be a balance between the four clusters that the Strategic Compass will address: no one cluster should overshadow the others in the final document. This applies especially to the capabilities and instruments cluster. Although fine-tuning defence capability development initiatives such as PESCO, the EDF and CARD will be an important element in this cluster, this should not become the overarching focus of the Strategic Compass. Were this to happen, the Strategic Compass would become a technical document, the penetrative power of which would be very limited outside the Brussels bubble: such documents are read by only a handful of officials in the EU capitals. Thus, when it comes to capability development, the Strategic Compass should focus more on the political level than did previous processes (e.g. CARD and the PESCO Strategic Review). It should explain how the EU wants to develop capabilities in the coming years and what the priorities will be (e.g. increased attention to projects that will boost the operational dimension of CSDP). The correct sequencing of the clusters could help to keep the Strategic Compass from becoming overly technical in character.

Fourth, the Strategic Compass should be concrete. One of the problems with the EUGS is that, although it is an extensive document that covers all aspects of EU foreign and security policy (including defence), it is vague on several important issues. To illustrate, while the EUGS is 60 pages long, Russia is only mentioned in two short paragraphs. Furthermore, strategic autonomy, the overall ambition of the EU's foreign, security and defence policy, was not defined in the EUGS. The IPSD, which was created by the EEAS, defined it as the EU's 'ability to act and cooperate with international and regional partners wherever possible, while being able to operate autonomously when and where necessary.'³⁷ However, this definition has not been formally endorsed by the member states as they have not adopted the IPSD.

This has led to endless debates about the precise meaning of strategic autonomy. And these debates, in turn, have caused occasional tensions between

³⁵ *EUobserver*, 'EU States Reject "Modest" Change on Foreign Policy Votes', 20 November 2020.

³⁶ EEAS, 'The EU in a Changing World: Staying on Course in Troubled Waters', Conference/Seminar (1 December 2020).

³⁷ Council of the EU, *Implementation Plan*, 17.



member states over how the ambition should be understood. The most public disagreement so far occurred in November 2020 when German Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer and French President Emmanuel Macron argued over strategic autonomy via the media. In other words, ambiguity risks creating confusion and unnecessary disputes. The Strategic Compass should therefore be as explicit as possible on the issues it discusses: What should the EU's future crisis management ambitions be? What is the EU's role in the protection of the European homeland? What are the Union's priorities for the development of strategic capability? How can the EU work more effectively with its partners to counter Russia and China? And so on.

Fifth, the resilience cluster in particular should address issues that have become prominent on the EU's agenda in the past two years. These include the security implications of climate change, the protection of critical infrastructure from hybrid attacks and cyberattacks, security of supply and strategic stockpiling. As regards the first two issues, the EEAS and the member states should utilise the EDA's Consultation Forum for Sustainable Energy in the Defence and Security Sector (CF SEDSS). This forum is a European Commission initiative that is managed by the EDA. It seeks to assist the member states' defence ministries with moving towards greener, more resilient and more energy-efficient models. The forum could be used to help find solutions to, *inter alia*, the security aspects of climate change and the protection of critical infrastructure. COVID-19 has highlighted the need to take further steps at the EU level when it comes to security of supply and strategic stockpiling. Some progress has already been made, for example the creation of rescEU medical equipment stockpiles in the framework of the Union's Civil Protection Mechanism. But additional steps such as joint supply procurement and increased funding should also be considered.

Sixth, the European Parliament and the national parliaments should be involved in the Strategic Compass process. EU and national parliamentarians will not have a direct role due to the intergovernmental character of the Union's security and defence policy. However, overall political acceptance of the Strategic Compass would be boosted by involving parliamentarians in committee discussions or other events, such as the Inter-Parliamentary Conference on CFSP and CSDP.³⁸ Furthermore, national security and defence committees and the European Parliament's SEDE possess significant expertise on the issues on which the

³⁸ The Inter-Parliamentary Conference on CFSP and CSDP brings together parliamentarians from the European Parliament and member state parliaments as well as from the parliaments of observer and EU-candidate countries. It provides a platform for debate and the exchange of information. The conference convenes every six months in the country holding the EU Council Presidency or in the European Parliament.



Strategic Compass clusters will focus (one reason for this being that some of the members of these groups were formerly ministers). This expertise should be utilised during the development of the document. The European Parliament's draft report on the implementation of CSDP in 2020 also notes that the Parliament is 'considering drawing up reports and recommendations on the key areas of the Strategic Compass, in order to provide parliamentary guidance'.³⁹ This would be useful. However, to have an impact, those reports and recommendations would have to be drawn up relatively quickly and published early in 2021. The EEAS will draft the Strategic Compass in the second half of 2021, after the strategic dialogue period in the spring. It hopes to present the first full draft to the member states in November.

Seventh, since the Strategic Compass will probably be the EU's flagship security and defence initiative for the next two years, the Union should explain to ordinary citizens why it matters. This would take a broad and coordinated communication effort. The EEAS's strategic communications division has a role to play here. More importantly, however, national ministers and parliamentarians (as well as those from the European Parliament) should clarify what the Strategic Compass means to their respective countries and why it is important. This could be done in op-eds and speeches given at public events. Both of these channels have greater penetrative power in the media spheres outside Brussels than official EU communication activities, which tend to be self-congratulatory, sterile and unappealing to the ordinary citizen. Furthermore, think tanks and other research institutions can play an important role in the development and promotion of the Strategic Compass and should therefore be involved in consultations throughout the process, as some have already been.

Eighth, going forward, the EEAS should repeat the exercise of preparing a common threat analysis every five years, under every new EU mandate. The EEAS has already produced different kinds of classified threat analyses, but these have been low-key documents intended mainly for bureaucrats and officials. The threat analysis that was produced for the Strategic Compass is different because it is comprehensive in character and will be discussed at a higher political level: by ambassadors and ministers, among others. This makes it a powerful tool for clarifying the different threats and challenges that the EU is facing and for promoting mutual understanding and the convergence of perceptions among the member states.

Ninth, the Strategic Compass should explain which (if any) existing EU documents it will render outdated and how it will be followed up from 2022

³⁹ European Parliament, 'Draft Report on the Implementation of the Common Security and Defence Policy – Annual Report 2020', 2020/2207/(INI) (12 November 2020), 5.



onwards. The EU has noted that the Strategic Compass aims to strengthen the implementation of the 2016 EUGS and the IPSD. However, once the member states have agreed the direction of the EU's security and defence policy for 2025–30, it would seem necessary to revise the IPSD so that it reflects the Strategic Compass. Furthermore, a revision of the EUGS will eventually have to follow too. Since its publication in 2016, the UK has left the EU, meaning that the Union has lost one of its strongest members in the field of security and defence. Furthermore, great power competition has intensified in the years since 2016, and the rules-based international order has been put under unprecedented strain, including by COVID-19. Although specific elements of the EUGS continue to be valued (e.g. the need to develop both the EU's strategic autonomy and the resilience of the Union's partners), the extent to which new EU security strategies and doctrines should be based on the EUGS is becoming questionable.

Tenth, over the years the EU has published a variety of thematic and geographical sub-strategies, concepts and procedures. Many of these will inevitably be impacted by one or more of the Strategic Compass's four clusters and will need to be revised once the Compass has been adopted. Some of these documents, such as the 2020 EU Security Union Strategy and the new 2020 EU Cybersecurity Strategy, are very recent and will thus not need to be modified. However, there are others that have clearly become outdated over the years in light of developments both within and outside the EU, such as the 2011 EU Sahel Strategy, the 2014 EU Maritime Security Strategy and the 2016 EU Space Strategy.



Conclusion

The focus of EU security and defence cooperation has shifted from launching new initiatives to fine-tuning the existing system, which the Union has been setting up since 2016. This system focuses heavily on joint defence research and capability development projects to boost the competitiveness and autonomy of the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB). At the moment, it needs additional high-level political direction to identify the types of capabilities that the EU needs to become strategically autonomous and to strengthen the European pillar of NATO. The EU also needs to decide how it should approach major security challenges, including climate change, supply line security, strategic stockpiling, the protection of critical infrastructure and the disruptive activities of authoritarian regimes, such as those in Russia and China.

The Strategic Compass process will probably be the EU's flagship security and defence initiative for the next two years. It seeks to provide new political direction for the Union's security and defence policy, to facilitate the development of a shared strategic culture among the member states and to clarify the overall image of EU security and defence cooperation that post-2016 initiatives such as PESCO, CARD and the EDF have created. The last-mentioned point is related to the question of what kind of security and defence actor the EU really wants to become. The Strategic Compass could become an important tool for helping the EU navigate through challenges on the world stage and for boosting the Union's ability to achieve strategic autonomy. A key advantage that the Strategic Compass process has over the development of the EUGS is that the member states are in the driver's seat: they will formally adopt the document in 2022. This means that the end-product could have considerable political weight both in Brussels and in the member states' capitals—this will, of course, depend on what the member states make of it and how it is followed up. To be successful, the Strategic Compass needs to be as concrete as possible when outlining how the EU should handle even the most sensitive challenges that it is facing and is likely to face in the next 5 to 10 years. A compass is only useful if it can tell the navigator where north is. For the Strategic Compass to be successful, the EU needs to set a clearly defined strategic north.



Bibliography

Biscop, S., 'From Global Strategy to Strategic Compass: Where Is the EU Heading?', Egmont, Security Policy Brief no. 121 (December 2019), accessed at <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/from-global-strategy-to-strategic-compass-where-is-the-eu-heading/> on 23 November 2020.

Borrell, J., 'Europe Security and Defence: The Way Forward', EU External Action Service, A Window on the World (blog), 21 June 2020, accessed at https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/81247/europe-security-and-defence-way-forward_en on 17 November 2020.

Borrell, J., 'European Strategic Complacency Is Not an Option', *Project Syndicate*, 13 November 2020, accessed at <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/why-the-eu-must-achieve-strategic-autonomy-by-josep-borrell-2020-11> on 15 November 2020.

Bossong, R., *Intelligence Support for EU Security Policy: Options for Enhancing the Flow of Information and Political Oversight*, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, SWP Comment no. 51 (December 2018), accessed at https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2018C51_Bsg.pdf on 17 November 2020.

CDU, 'Für ein Europa der Sicherheit' (6 June 2018), accessed at <https://www.cdu.de/fuer-ein-europa-der-sicherheit> on 16 November 2020.

CDU, *Sonstige Beschlüsse des 32. Parteitags der CDU Deutschlands*, 32nd party convention of the CDU of Germany, held at Leipziger Messe on 22–3 November 2019, accessed at https://www.cdu.de/system/tdf/media/images/leipzig2019/32._parteitag_2019_sonstige_beschluesse_2.pdf?file=1&type=field_collection_item&id=19908 on 16 November 2020.

Chatham House, 'Chatham House Rule' (n.d.), accessed at <https://www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/chatham-house-rule> on 23 November 2020.

Council of the EU, 'Council Conclusions on Security and Defence', 8910/20 (17 June 2020), accessed at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/44521/st08910-en20.pdf> on 16 November 2020.

Council of the EU, *Implementation Plan on Security and Defence*, 14392/16 (14 November 2016), accessed at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/22460/eugs-implementation-plan-st14392en16.pdf> on 17 November 2020.



Council of the EU, 'Video Conference of Defence Ministers', Meeting no. VC-DEFENCE-1120 (20 November 2020), accessed at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/fac/2020/11/20/> on 23 November 2020.

EEAS, 'Questions and Answers: Threat Analysis – A Background for the Strategic Compass', Memo (20 November 2020), accessed at https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/2020_11_20_memo_questions_and_answers_-_threat_analysis_-_copy.pdf on 1 December 2020.

EEAS, 'The EU in a Changing World: Staying on Course in Troubled Waters', Conference/Seminar (1 December 2020), accessed at https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/88991/SAVE%20THE%20DATE%20-%20The%20EU%20in%20a%20changing%20world%20-%20Staying%20on%20course%20in%20troubled%20waters on 1 December 2020.

EU, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe – A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy* (June 2016), accessed at https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf on 16 November 2020.

EU Institute for Security Studies, 'Continuity and Change in European Security and Defence? A Discussion with Finland and Croatia', Report (15 November 2019), accessed at <https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/EU%20Defence%20-%20Report.pdf> on 16 November 2020.

EUobserver, 'EU States Reject "Modest" Change on Foreign Policy Votes', 20 November 2020, accessed at <https://euobserver.com/tickers/150134> on 23 November 2020.

European Parliament, Committee on Security and Defence, Multimedia Centre (16 November 2020, 10:00–11:00), accessed at https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/committee-on-security-and-defense_20201116-1000-COMMITTEE-SEDE_vd on 18 November 2020.

European Parliament, 'Draft Report on the Implementation of the Common Security and Defence Policy – Annual Report 2020', 2020/2207/(INI) (12 November 2020), accessed at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/AFET-PR-657487_EN.pdf on 24 November 2020.

European Parliament, Subcommittee on Security and Defence, Multimedia Centre (30 December 2020, 13:45–15:45), accessed at https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/subcommittee-on-security-and-defense_20201130-1345-COMMITTEE-SEDE_vd on 1 December 2020.



Fiott, D., 'Uncharted Territory? Towards a Common Threat Analysis and a Strategic Compass for EU Security and Defence', EU Institute for Security Studies, Brief 16 (July 2020), accessed at https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%2016%20Strategic%20Compass_0.pdf on 17 November 2020.

Germany's Presidency of the Council of the EU, 'Together for Europe's Recovery: Programme for Germany's Presidency of the Council of the European Union – 1 July to 31 December 2020' (n.d.), accessed at <https://www.eu2020.de/blob/2360248/e0312c50f910931819ab67f630d15b2f/06-30-pdf-programm-en-data.pdf> on 16 November 2020.

Koenig, N., *The EU's Strategic Compass for Security and Defence: Just Another Paper?* Hertie School, Jacques Delors Centre, Policy paper (10 July 2020), accessed at <https://www.delorscentre.eu/en/publications/detail/publication/the-eus-strategic-compass-for-security-and-defence-just-another-paper> on 23 November 2020.

Kramp-Karrenbauer, A., 'Speech by Federal Minister of Defence at the Bundeswehr University Munich', speech given on 7 November 2019, German Federal Ministry of Defence website, accessed at <https://www.bmvg.de/de/aktuelles/speech-federal-minister-of-defence-security-policy-147072> on 16 November 2020.

Major, C. and Mölling, C., *Europe, Germany and Defense: Priorities and Challenges of the German EU Presidency and the Way Ahead for European Defense*, Fondation pour la recherche strategique, Note no. 63/20 (13 October 2020), accessed at <https://www.frstrategie.org/en/publications/notes/europe-germany-and-defense-priorities-and-challenges-german-eu-presidency-and-way-ahead-european-defense-2020> on 23 November 2020.

Mölling, C. and Schütz, T. (eds.), *The EU's Strategic Compass and Its Four Baskets: Recommendations to Make the Most of It*, German Council on Foreign Relations, DGAP Report no. 13 (November 2020), accessed at <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/eus-strategic-compass-and-its-four-baskets> on 23 November 2020.

NATO, 'Strategic Concepts' (24 September 2020), accessed at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_56626.htm on 24 November 2020.

Scazzieri, L., 'Can the EU's Strategic Compass Steer European Defence?', Centre for European Reform, *CER Bulletin*, Issue 134 (October/November 2020), accessed at <https://www.cer.eu/publications/archive/bulletin-article/2020/can-eus-strategic-compass-steer-european-defence> on 23 November 2020.



About the author

Niklas Nováky, Ph.D., is a Research Officer at the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies. He focuses on foreign, security and defence policy. He is also the Assistant Editor-in-Chief of the *European View*, the Martens Centre's biannual policy journal. He is author of the book *European Union Military Operations: A Collective Action Perspective* (Routledge 2018). Dr Nováky has also published peer-reviewed articles on various aspects of EU defence cooperation in some of the most respected academic journals in the field.

Credits

The Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies is the political foundation and think tank of the European People's Party (EPP), dedicated to the promotion of Christian Democrat, conservative and like-minded political values.

Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies
Rue du Commerce 20
Brussels, BE 1000

For more information please visit: www.martenscentre.eu

External editor: Communicative English bvba
Typesetting: Victoria Agency
Printed in Belgium by Drukkerij Jo Vandenbulcke

This publication receives funding from the European Parliament.
© 2020 Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies

The European Parliament and the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies assume no responsibility for facts or opinions expressed in this publication or their subsequent use. Sole responsibility lies with the author of this publication.