

Another article on the Strategic Compass (kind of)

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An unconfirmed anecdote is doing the rounds following the informal European Council meeting in Slovenia at which leaders laid out their cards on EU defence cooperation. Whilst leaders were leaving what Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte called a ‘brainstorming debate’ (Herszenhorn and Bayer 2021) in the early hours of the morning, one member asked another if she had understood in which direction they (i.e. the Union) are going. Slightly bemused, her counterpart answered, ‘Who cares about the direction?’ To which the former replied, ‘The Compass does . . .’.

Indeed, the Strategic Compass has been asked to provide direction—more specifically to ‘narrow the gap between ambition and reality’ and ‘clarify the overall image of EU defence cooperation’ (Nováky 2020, 1). Savvy EU observers, security experts and flag-waving federalists were waiting for Mr Josep Borrell (the EU’s *almost* foreign minister) to present the first results of this two-year process just as the Israelites of old looked to Moses to lead them out of Egypt. Expectations were high! How could it not be so? The EU’s very own yes-man, President Charles Michel, has declared 2022 the ‘year of European Defence’ (Herszenhorn 2021).¹ The stars are aligning! The brave European seafarers are reaching Ithaca. But hold on a moment. . . What if the EU’s very own North Star turns out to be not so bright after all?

It is such a shame that we only talk about ‘bubbles’ when we discuss the economy and the financial world, as I cannot find a more appropriate word to describe the hype around the Strategic Compass. It brings to mind the same frenzy that engulfed another catchphrase in the ‘strategic’ family—a muted one, of course, as thankfully EU current affairs have not reached mass popularity status (yet). The difference is that this time around what is described as ‘strategic’ is a compass: a reliable, solid and tested navigation device that has been showing the way since time immemorial. (Well, since the Chinese Han

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Dynasty around 206 BC. But please keep this to yourself, dear reader, because the fact that it was not made in Europe will not resonate very well with Berlaymont.) It has little in common with its perplexing, ambiguous and contested predecessor, *strategic autonomy*.

There is a very real threat (pun intended) that the Strategic Compass will end up being a real-life version of the compass the irreverent *Pirates of the Caribbean* protagonist Jack Sparrow held, which always pointed in the direction he wanted.² In that situation the perception of a threat becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. But reaching that stage is another brain teaser altogether. The EU's very own Moses, Mr Borrell, caught wind of this when he famously told the leaders in that same meeting (at which everything and nothing seemed to happen), 'We need to know what we want' (Herszenhorn and Bayer 2021). There is nothing new or ground-breaking to report here, as the divergent strategic cultures in Europe keep being referenced as the only impediment to developing a common defence union (Zandee et al. 2020). One could even say that there is a certain bravery (or, for the cynics amongst us, a certain quixotism) attached to this statement, as it presupposes that 'we' (all the 27) have a common 'want' in the security and defence domain. This is precisely the source of the problem that the Compass has been tasked with circumventing: there is no consensus among the member states as to what constitutes a threat to the EU's security (Fiott 2020). How do you bring together those still lamenting the 'threat from the East'; the ones dreading 'the threat from within'; and finally, those concerned about the threat from above and beyond? That is the million-dollar question that the Compass has been tasked with answering.

To tighten this Gordian knot even more, in typical EU manner the Compass will almost certainly, 'for economic and political reasons' (Fiott 2020, 8), shy away from labelling specific countries as threats. For many member states, however, the threats they are facing have a name and a clear source: usually a dying democracy in the neighbourhood or a dictatorial adversary on the loose. It is certain that they will be seeking validation from their European brethren and a sense of recognition that goes beyond the longstanding policy of the 'sympathy rub' and a sterile statement that the EU is 'extremely/deeply/gravely concerned' (Is EU Concerned? 2021). Looking back at my school hiking years, which was the first and last time I held a compass in my hands, the magnetic needle did not tell me much: it was vague, abstract and unhelpful—and I would inevitably resort to the more accurate Google Maps application I had downloaded onto my phone. I guess we will have to wait and see whether the member states follow in the footsteps of my teenage self and end up doing their own thing, leaving the Compass forgotten in the background, persistently and continuously pointing north.

Notes

1. N.B. The European Commission has also declared 2022 to be the 'year of European Youth'. Despite being a 24-year-old who gets a bit excited whenever the words 'European', 'Defence' and 'Union' are placed next to each other, I cannot but think that both of these titles are rather ambitious.
2. With thanks here to Álvaro de Cruz for brushing up my Disney knowledge!

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