



Where does the Compass point? The European Commission's role in the development of EU security and defence policy

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Abstract

This article outlines some of the major EU security and defence policy initiatives and the role of the European Commission within these. The article focuses especially on those initiatives outlined in the draft document for the EU Strategic Compass that have a bearing both on the Commission's role and on other defence-related initiatives in 2022. The article also discusses the role of technological development and geo-economics in this new era of great-power competition. It concludes by discussing some of the implications of these developments for the political role of the European Commission and for the democratic and political accountability of the Union.

Keywords

EU Strategic Compass, European Commission, EU security and defence, Democratic accountability

Introduction

European Council President Charles Michel has called 2022 ‘the year of European defence’ (Herszenhorn 2021). This is not surprising as the EU is expected to adopt the new (and hopefully ambitious) Strategic Compass for Security and Defence to enhance and make concrete the Union's ambition within the security and defence policy domain. Similarly, the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union, which takes

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place in the first half of 2022, has put security, defence and ‘European sovereignty’ high on its political agenda (France, EU Presidency 2022). In the spring, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and French President Emmanuel Macron will also co-chair a European summit on defence to create further impetus for more EU defence integration.

Studies on EU security and defence policy have traditionally revolved around the intergovernmental characteristics of the policy field (see e.g. Bergmann and Müller 2021). However, in the last couple of years the role of the European Commission has been both enhanced and transformed. This article hence argues that the work of the EU’s Strategic Compass and other new initiatives could further strengthen the Commission’s role in EU defence-policy cooperation. However, this development also raises questions about the political role of the Commission, the democratic and political accountability of the Union, and the overall role of the EU in foreign affairs. The article thus concludes that more research and debate is needed on this development.

The European Commission’s new role in defence

The Commission has long nurtured an ambition to become a stronger security and defence-policy actor within the European project (for a longer discussion, see e.g. Håkansson 2021; Csernatonni 2021a; Oliveira Martins and Mawdsley 2021; Haroche 2020). And since 2016, the EU—and especially the Commission—has taken a qualitative and quantitative leap in terms of its security and defence-policy cooperation. Under the leadership of the Commission, the EU has, among other things, rolled out a €7.9 billion European Defence Fund (EDF) to incentivise cross-border defence–industrial collaboration, launched a scheme to fund infrastructure projects to enhance military mobility in Europe, strengthened cooperation with NATO (a new EU–NATO declaration is expected in 2022), and established a new Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space (DG DEFIS) within the Commission. Nevertheless, the Commission’s new role in the defence-policy field initially created some intra-institutional tensions with actors such as the European Defence Agency and the European External Action Service (EEAS) (Fiott 2015; Haroche 2020). However, cooperation now seems to have been both improved and enhanced.¹

The EU’s Strategic Compass and new security and defence initiatives in 2022

The draft of the EU Strategic Compass outlines several proposals that have a bearing on the Commission’s role. The overall document gives a bleak picture of the state of affairs in world politics and highlights the unstable neighbourhood on Europe’s doorstep, as well as the increasing geopolitical tensions globally (EEAS 2021). While the draft Strategic Compass outlines a range of divergent and rather ambitious proposals, this article will only focus on the initiatives that have a bearing on the Commission’s competences² (for an analysis of the Compass and other proposals, see e.g. Koenig 2021; Fiott and Lindstrom 2021; Kaim and Kampin 2022). With regard to the defence–industrial

domain, the draft tries to commit the member states to increasing funding for the EDF in the budget period after 2027. This should also be seen in the light of the decreased funding for the EDF at present, as the member states reduced the Commission's proposed €13 billion in the current budget to €7.9 billion (Håkansson 2021, 602).

Moreover, the draft Compass focuses on increasing the coherence between supranational initiatives, such as the EDF, and intergovernmental defence projects, such as Permanent Structured Cooperation and the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence. In 2022 we will also see a new defence package and a roadmap from the Commission on security and defence technologies to enhance research, technological development and innovation (European Commission 2021b). With this defence package we should expect an ambitious outlook from the Commission's side which could strengthen its role in EU security and defence policy. Kaim and Kempin (2022, 5) have noted that over the last couple of years, the Commission has sought 'to shift the focus of European security and defense policy from a policy field dominated by member states to a supranational one.' Likewise, in 2021 the Commission also presented its action plan to create synergies between the civilian, defence and space industries in order to create a more joined-up approach and enhance the EU's innovation power within the field (European Commission 2021a). Consequently, the Commission is seeking both to develop its own role and to create a more coherent and joined-up approach to defence-industrial cooperation. In her 2021 State of the Union address, the Commission president also outlined the idea of a waiver on value-added tax for all European-made military and defence equipment (von der Leyen 2021).

Another strong focus in the Compass is on the EU's ability to respond to different types of hybrid threats. Among others, Hindrén has emphasised that the 'new threat environment puts a lot more pressure on the Union and its decision-making as it encompasses both the Council and the Commission competencies' (2021, 15). He goes on to underline how the Commission has developed a range of 'critically important resilience-building initiatives', and argues that the Strategic Compass process also creates an opportunity to improve the Union's response to hybrid threats (Hindrén 2021, 16).³ The draft Compass consequently outlines a range of proposals connected to ensuring protection against hybrid threats. These include, among others, creating EU Rapid Hybrid Response Teams, strengthening the EU Cyber Diplomacy Toolbox and further developing the EU's Cyber Defence Policy Framework (EEAS 2021).

In 2022 the Commission will also propose a new European Cyber Resilience Act to strengthen the Union's response to cyber-threats (European Commission 2021b). Some authors have suggested that the Commission has used the cybersecurity policy field to strategically enhance its authority in a field that is traditionally an intergovernmental domain (Brandão and Camisão 2021). They argue moreover that more research is needed into how the Commission has 'graduated from being a negligible actor to an influential player' in EU security and defence policy (Brandão and Camisão 2021, 16). Others have suggested that the EU, and especially the Commission, is now moving towards the concept of 'total defence', encompassing areas from societal security to crisis management and defence proper (Engberg 2021).

Another proposal in the Compass is to launch, by 2023, a new EU Space Strategy for security and defence, in which we can expect the Commission's DG DEFIS to take the lead. Furthermore, in regard to intelligence cooperation, the Compass outlines the importance of 'reinforc[ing] the role of the EU Intelligence Centre as [a] single entry point for Member States' Intelligence and Security Services' (EEAS 2021, 13). This was also strongly stressed in von der Leyen's 2021 State of the Union address (von der Leyen 2021).

Geo-economics, trade and technologies

Another new development is the increased usage of geo-economic⁴ tools in today's great-power competition and rivalry (see e.g. discussions in Fjäder et al. 2021; Christiansen 2020). As China is using powerful economic coercion tactics against Lithuania, some member states want to address this dimension of power more clearly in the final version of the Strategic Compass (Brzozowski 2022). In late 2021, the Commission also proposed a new tool to increase the EU's protection from economic coercion by third countries. The tool aims to address the threat of the weaponisation of trade and investment against the EU and its member states (European Commission 2021c). Negotiations on this proposal will now take place among the member states and in the European Parliament, as opinions are still somewhat divided on the subject (Hanke Vela 2021). Nevertheless, this could be seen as a step towards utilising the Union's economic power and providing a more geo-economic European Commission (see also discussions in Hackenbroich and Zerka 2021).

Trade issues and technological development have consequently become deeply embedded in today's geopolitical rivalry (Franke and Torreblanca 2021; Csernatonì 2021b; European Commission 2021d). This is also made clear in the Compass document, which stresses that 'reducing strategic dependencies and enhancing our technological sovereignty is critical if we are to meet the challenges of a more dangerous world' (EEAS 2021, 18). Similarly, the European Commission's work programme for 2022 also outlines vulnerabilities in the supply of semiconductors 'due to high dependency on a very limited number of non-EU suppliers'. Hence, during 2022 the Commission will propose a new European chips act to 'promote a state-of-the-art European chip ecosystem' (European Commission 2021b, 4–5). And we can expect that the Commission will continue to follow this path, as Csernatonì describes: 'the EU, and especially the European Commission, seems to be adopting a hands-on style and a more centralised rationality in governing the innovation and funding of [emerging and disruptive technologies] at the supranational level' (2021b, 161).

Thus, this new era of great-power competition is increasing the overlap between the field of security and defence and other policy areas, such as trade, economics and technological development.

Conclusion

These developments pose the question of whether the European Commission is moving towards becoming a more geopolitical (or geo-economic) actor. And overall, this could

be seen as the Union shifting towards becoming a more interest-based foreign-policy actor. The EU's foreign and security policy can hence be seen as adapting to the new reality in world politics (see also discussions in Rieker and Riddervold 2021). Nevertheless, there is a risk of over-emphasising this development, as the Union (and the Commission) now needs to 'walk the talk'. There is also a risk that the Compass and the security and defence ambitions of the EU and the Commission could expand the classic 'capability–expectations gap' (Hill 1993; for a critical view of the Compass process, see Tallis 2022).

The greater role of the Commission within these fields also gives rise to questions about the democratic and political accountability of the Union. Moreover, it calls into question the role of both the European and national parliaments in the oversight of these new initiatives and competences (Csernaton and Laci 2020; Rosén and Raube 2018; Herranz-Surrallés 2019; Csernaton and Reykers 2021). Furthermore, scholarly debate on the Commission's political role has also expanded in recent years. While some have argued that the political role of the European Commission is in decline (e.g. Bickerton et al. 2015), others have argued that the Commission has both become more presidential (Kassim et al. 2017; Bürgin 2018) and expanded its political role in other ways (Nugent and Rhinard 2016; 2019; Peterson 2017; Becker et al. 2016). Others have also suggested that the 'new European Council–dominated crisis governance paradoxically [has] strengthened the role of EU institutions' (Beach and Smeets 2020; see also discussions in Bauer and Becker 2014; Niemann and Ioannou 2015). The research agenda should hence continue to focus on what these new developments will mean for the democratic and political accountability of the Union, the political role of the European Commission and the overall (geopolitical) role of the EU.

Notes

1. Interviews conducted with officials from the European Commission, the EEAS and the European Defence Agency in 2020 and 2021.
2. The Commission's competences are mainly connected to defence–industrial cooperation due to the EU treaties. However, the Commission has also, over time, expanded its role, for instance to cover cybersecurity issues. See Håkansson (2021), especially p. 593 for a discussion of the Commission's competences.
3. Several European Commission officials have also underlined how the Commission could and might want to be more involved in the process of responding to hybrid threats (interviews conducted with officials from DG DEFIS/the European Commission in Brussels in 2020).
4. Geo-economics can be defined as 'the use of economic instruments to promote and defend national interests, and to produce beneficial geopolitical results; and the effects of other nations' economic actions on a country's geopolitical goals' (Blackwill and Harris 2016, 20).

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