

The EU's Strategic Compass: How to Translate It into Capabilities?

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By launching a war against Ukraine, right on the borders of the European Union, Russia has unleashed the strongest push to strengthen Europe's defence since the end of the Cold War. Only its initial 2014 invasion of Ukraine came close to having such an effect. NATO has activated its defence plans and deployed forces on the borders with Russia. Just about every state in Europe has announced increased defence spending. And the EU has finalized its Strategic Compass, its first ever defence strategy, with a much increased sense of urgency and purpose. The role of the EU in linking up national announcements and NATO targets is crucial, in fact, in that it provides a framework to align the efforts of the EU Member States and ensures that the EU's own indispensable targets are incorporated.

Additional resources will generate a lot more output if states cooperate and create synergies and effects of scale. The beauty of the EU tools for defence, in particular Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF), is that there are no limits on the types of capabilities that can be developed. EU Member States are perfectly free to use them to collectively generate capabilities required for territorial defence and deterrence within the NATO framework, in a way that

is much more cost effective than if they were to do so by themselves.

While deterrence and defence on Europe's eastern flank absorb all attention, the southern flank must not be forgotten. A Rapid Deployment Capacity, one of the priorities of the Strategic Compass,² remains necessary to prevent security crises in the south from threatening EU interests, and to counter Russia, which is very much present there as well. Seen from Moscow's perspective, eastern Europe, the Caucasus and the Mediterranean are one large theatre in which to thwart Europe's projects.

European leaders must consider how to put EU tools to use in both the short and the long term: establishing new capabilities more or less immediately, with arms and equipment procured off the shelf, including the Rapid Deployment Capacity; and investing in next generation platforms for future capabilities, operationalizing the priorities set by the *Compass*.

The Short Term: Filling the Gaps in Europe's Arsenal

The *Strategic Compass* mostly looks at investment in next generation capabilities over the current decade and beyond, but the EU has a key role to play in short-term capability efforts.

First of all, the EU can provide political impetus by setting its ambitions at a high level. EU Member States that are NATO allies could agree, for example, that, regardless of contributions from other allies, they must always have the capacity to provide the

¹ Prof. Dr. Sven Biscop is also the author of *Grand Strategy in 10 Words – A Guide to Great Power Politics in the 21st Century* Bristol University Press, 2021.

² EEAS, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, EU (2022)*. www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic_compass_en3_web.pdf

three heavy brigades that make up the land component of the NATO Response Force. Similarly, they could agree that, if necessary, they must be able to offer a framework nation for each ad hoc battlegroup³ deployed on the territory of an ally on the eastern flank. In addition to this, they could agree to always being ready and able to deploy a battlegroup to Finland and Sweden as well – EU Member States that, for now, are not NATO allies – and strengthen defence and deterrence there if requested.

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Second, in the EU framework, Member States can create synergies and effects of scale by coordinating their additional defence efforts. Subsets of EU Member States can anchor existing and additional national capabilities in permanent multinational formations, co-owned by those states that contribute to them.

There are ample opportunities for such “Europeanization” in many areas; for example:

- **Stocks:** All European countries have to replenish stocks of arms, ammunition, and other supplies. EU Member States that use the same equipment could easily create an accounting system for the pooled management of stocks, so that those with urgent operational needs can have recourse to the stocks of fellow Member States.
- **Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD):** Countries that, like Germany, are considering enhancing their air defences, can anchor their national capabilities (both existing and new, off-the-shelf systems) in a common Air Defence Command, and permanently integrate logistics, maintenance, and training, and organize common exer-

cises. In addition to air defence, however, Europeans ought also to enhance their own offensive missile capabilities; here too, off-the-shelf systems are available.

- **Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs):** Armed drones have quickly become a fixed feature of any battlefield. As most EU Member States have only just entered this field, or are about to, this is a chance to integrate it from the start. National units can be set up as building blocks of a common Drone Command with, once again, integrated logistics, maintenance and training, and common exercises.
- **Cyber:** As hybrid actions against the EU can only be expected to increase, EU Member States ought to create their own offensive cyber capabilities. In this area too, as countries are largely starting from scratch, a common Cyber Command would be the logical step, consisting of national building blocks with integrated logistics, maintenance and training, and common exercises.

Such initiatives could easily become PESCO projects, contributing to the real purpose of PESCO: creating a full-spectrum, comprehensive force package.

Also in the Short Term: The EU Rapid Deployment Capacity

The Rapid Deployment Capacity is what strategic autonomy is all about: autonomous crisis management operations outside Europe. The *Compass* states that it “will consist of substantially modified EU Battlegroups and of pre-identified Member States’ military forces and capabilities.”

The main modification seems to be that Battlegroups will be on standby for a year rather than a semester. The *Compass* also stresses the strategic enablers needed to deploy them, but these were already part of the Battlegroup concept, of course – Member States just had difficulty providing them. The main problems with the Battlegroups remain, therefore: a Union of 27 has a standby force that at any one time

³ In a NATO context, a battlegroup is an ad hoc formation made up of units from various allies, such as those initially deployed in the Baltic states and Poland, and now also in other eastern European states. Not to be confused with the EU Battlegroup, a rotational standby force for operations outside Europe.

is made up of a handful of Member States, and it is that handful that in a crisis decides whether or not to deploy what remains of *their* troops – not the 27. Moreover, a Battlegroup based on a single combat battalion can only intervene in a meaningful way in very few specific scenarios. And the Battlegroups are temporary formations, so there is little or no accumulation of experience.

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The Battlegroups were not killed off⁴ because many Member States insisted on retaining them. Let those who advocated for them continue to tinker with them, while others, if they want a real Rapid Deployment Capacity, focus on pre-identified national forces.

The aim of the Rapid Deployment Capacity is to intervene at brigade level: 5,000 troops. What is needed, therefore, is for a set of Member States to each identify a national brigade capable of expeditionary operations, and to permanently assign them to a corps headquarters – the existing Eurocorps HQ would be eminently suitable. These brigades should organize regular manoeuvres together, as a corps. Over time, doctrine and equipment can be harmonized between brigades; combat support and combat service support can be organized at corps level through a combination of pooling and division of labour; and common enablers can be built around the corps.

Thus a pool of interoperable expeditionary brigades will emerge, which will not be on standby, but rather have a high degree of readiness, from which a tailored force can be generated for a specific operation. The more Member States that commit a brigade to the scheme, the more likely that a willing coalition will be ready to act in a given crisis. There is obvi-

ously no unnecessary overlap with the NATO Response Force, which requires heavier brigades for territorial defence.

A similar scheme can be easily applied to naval and air forces, by the way, which the *Compass* rightly highlights. The national building blocks would then be frigates and squadrons.

The Long Term: Next Generation Platforms

The EU is very good at producing lists: The High-Impact Capability Goals of the EU Military Staff, the Capability Development Plan of the European Defence Agency, the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), the EDF, and now the *Compass* all produce their own set of priorities. These lists largely, but never entirely, overlap. Member States readily sign up to such lists, with the full intention of not stopping the other 26 from acting upon them – but not necessarily of doing so themselves.

The March 2022 European Council, building on the informal meeting in Versailles earlier that month, asked for yet another list, with a rather surprising defence industrial focus, tasking the Commission and the European Defence Agency (EDA) with the development of an analysis of “the defence investment gaps and the proposals for any further initiative necessary to strengthen the European defence industrial and technological base.”

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What is necessary now is for Member States to finally take their pick from all these lists and decide not only in which industries and technologies, but also in which capabilities they will invest. For *Compass* priorities such as a next generation main battle

⁴ BISCOP, Sven; “Kill the Battlegroups.” *Europe in the World*, Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations, November 2021. www.egmontinstitute.be/kill-the-battlegroups/.

tank or combat air system to take off, for example, a sufficient number of Member States must now finally commit to them, allocate money and announce how many tanks, aircraft or drones they eventually envisage procuring, and in order to constitute which capability. The focus should not only be on conventional “hardware,” of course, but also on areas such as space and cyber, as the *Compass* rightly points out. One often hears the argument that defence projects take a long time to come to fruition – often decades – and that is correct. If no Member States sign up to some of these projects *now*, though, they will forever remain in the distant future. But if they do, the EU can position itself as the indispensable clearing house of Europe’s defence, offering the forum and the instruments for the states of Europe to pool their defence efforts. Without such pooling, Europeans will not be able to deploy, let alone sustain, significant forces on their southern flank. Nor will they be able to meet key NATO targets in a cost-effective way, if at all.

Conclusion: From Cooperation to Integration

The armed forces of the EU Member States don’t lack mass – they lack integration. The result of the current fragmentation – in terms of planning, procurement and manoeuvres – is that there are huge gaps in Europe’s arsenals, while many of the capabilities that do exist are at a low state of readiness. It

would be an absolute loss if the momentum that now exists to strengthen Europe’s defence is not put to use to strengthen integration. The way Europeans spend their defence budgets, across 27 nearly totally separate armed forces, is simply wasteful. Adding more money without changing the way it is spent, will inevitably mean that a lot of the extra money will be wasted as well, or at least yield less capability than it could if spent together.

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One would have expected EU Member States to have advanced further than they have. The *Strategic Compass* has been two years in the making: why did Member States wait until now to discuss who was actually going to act on which of its priorities? Everything is still possible, though. Throughout the drafting process, the mantra was that after the adoption of the *Compass*, there would be no need for an implementation plan or other document – the *Compass* itself would be directly implemented. Let Member States please prove that now.