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### In Search of Direction: EU Strategic Compass

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Strategic Compass may provide momentum for EU defence cooperation, speed-up development of military capabilities in Europe, reinforce NATO's defence and deterrence, and reduce transatlantic tensions over burden-sharing. Yet, some Member States are concerned about the negative effects of this strategising exercise on NATO, and may not implement its results if the EU military level of ambition is set too high. Hence, the Compass should take a middle-of-the-road approach: EU ambitions should be defined in terms of the ability of the Member States to provide decisive capabilities to crisis-management operations run within different frameworks (UN, NATO, or coalition-led), while the EU itself should finally deliver on the promise of running autonomous rapid-reaction operations, deploying battle group-sized forces.

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## The Roots and Goals of the Strategic Compass

The EU's most recent strategic reflection process is dubbed "Strategic Compass" and was proposed by Germany during its presidency of the Council of the EU last year. Its overall goal is to update the framework for further developing the EU defence portfolio. At its launch, the Compass was organised around four thematic baskets, as indicated by the [Council conclusions from June 2020](#). The first basket is called "crisis management" and it includes the type and number of missions and operations that the EU intends to run autonomously. The second, "capabilities", covers the issue of autonomous, European military capabilities needed for the indicated types of EU military engagement. The third is "resilience", understood mainly as the role of the EU in countering hybrid threats (such as cyberattacks, disinformation, propaganda, etc.). The fourth basket, "partnerships", concerns the overall relations of the EU with NATO, the UN, global powers, and regional actors in the security dimension.

By the end of 2020, the initial phase of the Compass was completed: [A classified, broad analysis of threats to security of the EU was established](#). Its results enabled further phases of the Compass in which the role and tasks of the EU are being developed now in more detail within each of the four baskets. The process is scheduled so that the draft conclusions and recommendations from the Compass will be presented in November 2021 and the final version will be adopted in spring 2022 during the French presidency, which has already indicated the Compass as its flagship task.

## The Stakes of Success

The core reason why the new strategic reflection process was initiated in the EU lies in the Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign And Security Policy (EUGS). Built around the concept of European strategic autonomy, [EUGS left this notion largely undefined](#) and only suggested, which in the military dimension entails the capacity of the EU to run some military operations entirely on its own, if and when necessary. EUGS stopped short of indicating ways of strengthening EU defence capacity. Hence, in November 2016 the Council adopted separate conclusions that set the framework for implementing EUGS. This document not only provided the groundwork for the later launch of permanent structured cooperation (PESCO) in the area of security and defence policy but also updated the catalogue of operations that the EU should be able to run autonomously (the previous iteration was agreed in 2008). These operations include joint crisis management and stabilisation operations, air and maritime surveillance/security missions, rapid-reaction and special forces operations, as well as a number of military training/advisory and civilian missions.

However, it seems the EU is not committed to implementing the military level of ambition as defined in these terms, and European capacity to engage in operations remains limited. Meant to motivate Member States to cooperate in defence more closely, [PESCO has been filled with numerous, very diverse projects \(47\)](#), which are largely uncoordinated and do not directly develop the EU ability to deploy forces. The build-up of a dedicated command-and-control cell (MPCC), tasked from this year on to run potential EU military operations of a combat ("executive") character, has been delayed because of a lacklustre approach by the Member States. The same reasons have led to a gradual decomposition of the system of battle groups, the only standing military instrument established within the EU with rapid reaction in mind. While each battle group is usually a multinational unit, put on standby for half a year following a period of planning, preparation, joint training, and a certification exercise, the Member States' unwillingness to contribute assets results in gaps in the standby roster.

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provide an updated and more precise framework for developing military capabilities within the EU, and in particular, that the Compass conclusions could be applied directly as a point of reference for key EU defence initiatives. Future projects run within PESCO and related defence-industrial programmes supported from the [European Defence Fund](#) could then be more coherent. It might also be possible to more precisely define what command and control capabilities the EU needs.

Altogether, the Compass could provide a viable roadmap for building a “full spectrum force package”—a pool of military assets, ready for use by the EU in various scenarios of crisis management without the support of NATO or the U.S. (this is also the declared goal of the PESCO Strategic Review, agreed in 2020). With adequate forces, including a proper command-and-control structure, and strong consensus about the operational engagement, the EU might turn out to be more willing and definitely more able to deploy forces in response to security crises in its neighbourhood.

## The Risk of Failure

The challenge to meaningful results from the Strategic Compass lies, on the one hand, in the ambitions of some Member States and European institutions and, on the other hand, in the concerns of another group of countries uneasy about the potential negative effects of the Compass on NATO. In preparing to take over the presidency of the Council in 2022, France is suggesting that the Compass should assume ambitious military goals for the EU (and European institutions seem to second France on that). Apart from the French threat perception, this approach has roots both in France’s traditional drive to lead in the EU and in its desire to signal strategic ambitions to the new U.S. administration. It is also a result of internal politics: President Emmanuel Macron, likely to face the Eurosceptic Marine Le Pen [in the 2022 presidential elections](#), so he may promote an ambitious European agenda to coalesce the pro-EU electorate around his candidacy. In Germany’s case, a more ambitious European defence agenda may come after the September 2021 parliamentary elections. Polls suggest that the Greens, which traditionally put an emphasis on EU defence, [are on their way to being a part of Germany’s next government](#).

These developments make it more likely that formal proposals will be made within the Compass process to agree a very ambitious catalogue of military operations to be run autonomously by the EU. This might involve the most complicated kinds of missions (including of a combat type and assuming use of lethal force to implement the mandate, such as NATO’s ISAF operation in Afghanistan), requiring the deployment of thousands of troops together with advanced capabilities like high-readiness forces, surveillance/reconnaissance assets, air support, etc. Such an assumption would in turn entail a reinforced EU command-and-control structure (perhaps a full-fledged EU military headquarters, replacing the MPCC) and new, joint European forces (bigger, than battle groups; one such proposal was already made by [14 EU Member States on 6 May](#)).

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There is, however, a group of countries concerned with the perspective of the EU committing to such a high military level of ambition. These are mostly, but not only, the Eastern Flank states, which see the inflated European ambitions as endangering the pool of forces available to NATO and needed for an effective reaction to contingencies involving Russia. Limitations in the financial, technical, human, and other spheres, such as operational commitments already made within NATO, the EU, the UN, etc., may force a number of Member States to choose which capability development initiatives they want to contribute their assets to: NATO’s or the EU’s. The notorious *single set of forces* issue could be overcome if the EU agrees that military capabilities developed within its framework will be

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available for NATO and meet the goals set within the Alliance's plans regarding the defence and deterrence capacity of its European members. This is, however, not presently in the interests of those countries that would like to capitalise on the Compass, which is presented as proof of the advances of the European integration project and an increasing self-sufficiency of Europe vis-à-vis the U.S.

At the same time, the majority of Member States do not seem to be ready to undertake far-reaching commitments regarding defence cooperation within the EU. Instead, they consider goals agreed in NATO the priority and follow national plans. Hence, there is a strong chance that attempts will be made to strike a compromise in which the EU's ambitious military goals would be reflected by vague language (for instance: "considering" or "aiming to" undertake some actions, similarly to the 2017 decision on PESCO in which the commitments of the participating states were diluted, as otherwise the Council would not agree to launch the mechanism). In that case, the credibility of the EU might easily take a further blow. There could hardly be anything more damaging to the perception of the Union as a defence policy actor than having ambitious rhetoric on strategic autonomy mired in a situation in which a big group of Member States do not undertake real actions to implement the conclusions of the Compass, and the European defence capacity remains constrained.

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## Conclusions: Towards a Middle-of-the-Road Approach

**A weak compromise on the conclusions from the Strategic Compass may greatly degrade the value of the entire exercise and result in yet another document with no real impact on European military capacity.**

A weak compromise on the conclusions from the Strategic Compass may greatly degrade the value of the entire exercise and result in yet another document with no real impact on European military capacity. To avoid such a scenario, the consensus should be firmly based on the assumption that the agreed military level of ambition for the EU is regarded by all Member States as fully implementable and dovetails with their political and security interests. Only such an approach can accommodate both the concerns of countries focused on

the transatlantic dimension of European security and the pro-European ambitions of those states that seek stronger European defence. Balancing these two extreme positions may be easier if the EU adopts a middle-of-the-road approach to the Strategic Compass exercise. This could be based on:

- Acknowledging that all major military operations crucial for the security of the EU will be first and foremost international efforts. As such, they are likely to be run within broader frameworks controlled by coalitions of the willing, the UN, or NATO, and with a strong role for regional actors. Consequently, the EU might agree that its military level of ambition should be primarily defined in terms of the [capacity to provide decisive capabilities to such operations](#), ensuring European say over the mandate, goals, and conduct of such missions.
- Renouncing calls for raising the EU military level of ambition by undertaking a responsibility to autonomously run bigger and more complex operations than those already agreed. The Compass should, however, stress that the EU needs to finally live up to those dated commitments, and in particular build credible capacity to engage in military rapid-reaction operations of an executive type with the use of battle group-sized forces.

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- Initiating a review of the battle groups system with a goal to finally make it possible for the EU to use the assets that comprise individual groups (particularly those already being planned for specific slots on the roster) independently. Capabilities such as medical support, CBRN, or reconnaissance could be deployed in less-demanding contingencies.
- Focusing on the goal of systematically increasing the pool of Member States' high-readiness forces, increasing their interoperability, and establishing structures and capabilities required for deploying such forces effectively in a wider set of scenarios (command-and-control cells, logistics, reconnaissance, strategic airlift, etc.).
- Confirming that as a rule, all multinational military capabilities developed within the EU framework are available not only for European operations but also for collective-defence and crisis-management operations conducted by NATO or any other military action undertaken by coalitions of the willing.
- Further deepening EU-NATO cooperation, in particular through new formats and mechanisms of collaboration. The imminent challenge is to make the Strategic Compass process a topic of EU-NATO consultations so that its conclusions and the updated political strategy of NATO, due also in 2022, do not present contradictory goals and assessments. The two documents should confirm that the Union and the Alliance mutually reinforce each other as two pillars of security in Europe, having different functions and assets, but a common goal. The EU and NATO should also further develop mechanisms to ensure that capability development within the EU follows NATO goals.
- Increasing the role of the EU, and the scope of its cooperation with NATO, on identifying, addressing, and building the resilience of states and societies to broadly understood "hybrid threats". This could be done in particular by increasing the budgets and broadening the scope of tasks of EU agencies that already deal with such threats by establishing new platforms of EU-NATO cooperation in this regard.