The European Union Strategic Compass

Abstract:

The European Council, the President of the European Commission and the High Representative for the Union's External Relations and Security Policy have been in favour of promoting a more geopolitical Union with a more assertive policy in its international relations. That issue has relaunched the question of whether the EU needs to review its strategy for external action, June 2016. But rather than reviewing this strategy, the Union has decided to draw up what has been called 'the Strategic Compass', an analysis that, based on the threats faced by the Union, will help to make the European strategic document more operational. In this analysis we intend to clarify what this Strategic Compass could consists of.

Keywords:

European Union, NATO, Strategic Compass, strategic autonomy, threats.

The European Union Strategic Compass

Resumen:

El Consejo Europeo, la presidenta de la Comisión Europea y el alto representante para Asuntos Exteriores y Política de Seguridad de la Unión se han mostrado favorables a impulsar una Unión más geopolítica que adopte una postura más asertiva en sus relaciones internacionales. Esto ha relanzado la cuestión de si la UE necesita revisar su estrategia para la acción exterior, emitida en junio de 2016. Pero en vez de revisar dicha estrategia, la Unión ha decidido confeccionar lo que se ha denominado «brújula estratégica», un análisis que, basado en las amenazas que sufre la Unión, ayude a hacer más operativo el documento estratégico europeo. En este análisis pretendemos clarificar en qué podría consistir dicha brújula estratégica.

Palabras clave:

Unión Europea, OTAN, brújula estratégica, autonomía estrategia, amenazas.

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Introduction

The increasingly deteriorating arc of instability around Europe is raising European security awareness and prompting debate on issues that, until a few years ago, remained outside the European Union's (EU) focus. These concerns are compounded by the United States' demand for Europe to assume a much more active and important role in its security, along with the strategic shift that the US is making away from this geographical area in order to focus on the Indo-Pacific.

Thus, the two major organisations that dominate the European geopolitical spectrum—NATO and the EU—have begun to modify their approaches to deal with the new geostrategic situation.

A major debate within the EU was triggered by the European Council's adoption in July 2016 of the new EU Global Strategy (EUGS): the need for the EU to acquire 'strategic autonomy'.

It is clear that the US, China and Russia see the EU as an international actor with limited capacity for global influence, despite being one of the world's largest economies, accounting for close to 22% of global gross domestic product, and the world's largest provider of development and humanitarian aid, outstripping all others combined (see figure below).
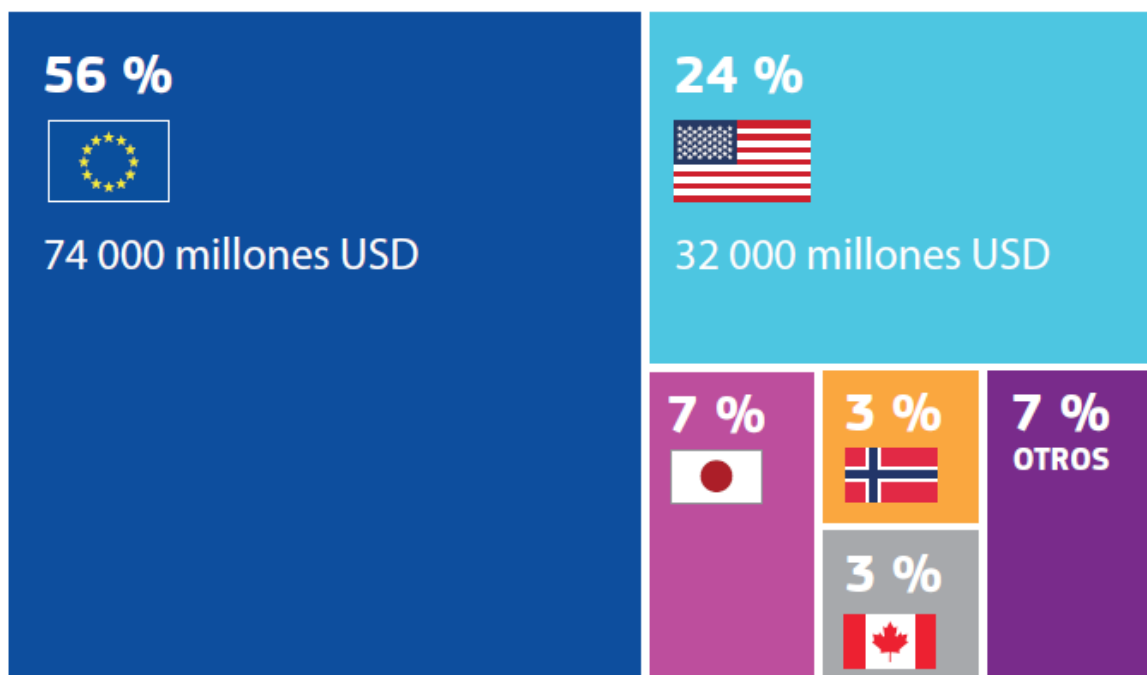

Figure 1. Development and humanitarian aid in the world in 2018. Source. Prepared internally.

In fact, if we analyse the strategies of the Trump Administration and the interim one issued by the Biden Administration[1], the EU does not play a very prominent role in either of them, especially in the former (Biden mentions the design of a strong common agenda with the EU).

This is because its capacity for external action continues to be hampered by the absence of a centralised decision-making power that can combine economics, diplomacy and coercive means in its foreign policy. This is obviously caused by the fact that the interests of the 27 are different and even divergent, mainly due to the fact that they inhabit sometimes very different and distant security ecosystems, resulting in a wide variety of views and priorities on different perceived threats and risks.

It is clear that the EU needs much greater autonomy than it currently enjoys to be able to provide itself with this capacity for geopolitical manoeuvre.

In its strategic agenda 2019-2024, the European Council stated that "In a world of increasing uncertainty, complexity and change, the EU needs to pursue a strategic course of action and increase its capacity to act autonomously"[2]. At the same time, both the President of the European Commission (EC), Ursula von der Leyen, and the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, were in favour of promoting a more geopolitical Union that "learns to use the language of power"[3].

Clearly, the EU's strategic autonomy will require an enormous effort in a number of areas, but the most important, and the one without which it will be very difficult to make progress, is in the creation of a shared vision of the international landscape, which allows for the forging of a common strategic culture and clarifies what kind of actor the Union should be on the world stage, what kind of threats we face and with what priority they should be addressed. Most of us agree that we want 'more Europe', but not so much on what it means and how to do it. Precisely in order to foster such a common strategic culture, the

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[1] 'Interim National Security Strategic Guidance', *The White House*. Available at: https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/03/interim-national-security-strategic-guidance/

[2] 'A new strategic agenda for the EU', European Council, Brussels, June 2019. Available at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/es/press/press-releases/2019/06/20/a-new-strategic-agenda-2019-2024/ Last consulted on 10 January 2022.

[3] BORREL, Josep. 'Hearing at the European Parliament', *Europarl*, Strasbourg, October 2019. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/resources/library/media/20191008RES63704/20191008RES63704.pdf Last consulted on 10 January 2022.

EU has initiated a process, which it wants to complete by mid-2022: the definition of a so-called 'strategic compass' for the EU.

The strategic compass for security and defence

On 16 June 2020, defence ministers agreed to develop a strategic compass for security and defence[4], an idea forged during the German Presidency of the Council of the European Union. The initiative is being developed over a two-year period and should end with the French presidency in the second half of 2022 (in this clearly designed coordinated Franco-German sequence, we can see the famous axis in action). The idea is to concretise the Union's level of ambition as a security provider on the international stage. In addition, the process is intended to contribute to fostering a common security and defence culture, which Brussels has traditionally identified as one of the fundamental weaknesses of the Common Security and Defence Policy. The process will take place in two phases:

- 1st phase: threat analysis (carried out during the second half of 2020). The HR, together with the civilian and military intelligence units of the Union's Foreign Service (EEAS), developed a comprehensive analysis of all threats and challenges that are deemed likely to affect the Union. The result has not been published and remains opaque to external scrutiny.

- 2nd phase: preparation of the strategic compass' (during 2021 and the first half of 2022). Based on the above threat analysis and other possible thematic analyses, Member States should develop a strategic compass that translates the level of political ambition defined in the 2016 strategy.

The process is expected to contribute to the development of a common security and defence culture, bringing views closer together and thus facilitating the EU's external action. For, although the foundations for a future 'European Security and Defence Union' have been laid conceptually and institutionally, it has not yet been possible to establish a shared understanding of its purpose, and so such a union has remained dormant since the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty.

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[4] 'A new strategic agenda for the EU', *European Council*, Brussels, June 2019. Available at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39914/a-new-strategic-agenda-2019-2024.pdf

The decision to launch the strategic compass came at a particularly difficult time. On the one hand, *Brexit* had been consummated, which meant that a European heavyweight in the field of defence and security was leaving the Union. While such abandonment would not have serious consequences for the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) *per se*, it would have serious consequences for its overall credibility and would negatively affect security[5]. On the other hand, then President Trump's decision to withdraw 9500 troops (12,000 were originally announced[6]) stationed in Germany in July 2020, coupled with statements that undermined Euro-Atlantic relations, led to a serious crisis of confidence within NATO.

On top of this, the global pandemic caused by the SARS-cov-2 virus has amplified geopolitical tensions and threats, while forcing member states to draw on resources to deal with it, resources that in many cases come from those that would have been devoted to security and defence. This will also be negatively affected by the fact that the next Multiannual Financial Framework will be substantially lowered from the level initially foreseen[7].

Admittedly, some member states were initially sceptical about the idea of developing a strategic compass, fearing that it would be a long, costly and, even then, unproductive process, resulting in yet another document to be shelved and given little or no importance. The initial success of Germany's temporary presidency, which managed to launch the process, overcoming the aforementioned initial reluctance, must therefore be acknowledged.

However, once the project has been launched, the hardest part remains to be done and to bring it to fruition. Let us look at each of the two phases separately.

Threat analysis

The conclusions of the above-mentioned Council of Ministers of 16 June 2020 included "develop[ing] a comprehensive 360-degree analysis of the full scope of threats and

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[5] PONTIJAS CALDERÓN, José Luis. *Implications of Brexit in the fields of defence and security*, Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies. Available at: http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2018/DIEEEO22-2018_Implicacion_Brexit_SegyDef_JLPC.pdf

[6] Available at: https://edition.cnn.com/2020/07/29/politics/us-withdraw-troops-germany/index.html

[7] FIOTT, Daniel et al. 'It's time to vaccinate Europe's Defence budgets', *EurActiv*, 20 April 2020.

challenges", to be carried out by the end of 2020. This analysis was to be carried out by civilian and military intelligence units, using the common coordination platform known as the Single Intelligence Analysis Capacity (SIAC). In addition, the process was to involve the Member States. Although it was intended to provide the framework for the subsequent discussions on the strategic compass, the former would not be a formal part of the latter and will remain a reserved document that will not be made public.

It is obvious that one of the main obstacles to its development is the disparity and divergence in perceived threats among member states, which is one of the main weaknesses of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). While some states are concerned about the fragility of Sahel states and the general and progressive deterioration of the area, others are too focused on the possibility of potential Russian aggression, which would threaten their own survival, while some focus on other threats, such as climate change, cyber-attacks or disinformation. This asymmetry in the perception of the different threats and in the priority given to them has very important implications for the EU, as it hampers its possibilities as an international security actor, unable to guarantee even its own security. Hence, some states prefer to rely on NATO in defining their priorities.

It is therefore very important to foster mutual understanding of the different perceptions Member States have of the threats and challenges they feel they are facing. But even so, while accepting that the idea is very positive, it is questionable to what extent the process of defining threats will be able to forge a common vision, or at least lay the foundations to move decisively towards it. In fact, difficulties were not long in emerging, as the first seminar on the subject held at the European Union Institute for Security Studies under the direction of the European Union's External Service showed the difficulty of fostering a common vision, when the form, structure and objective of threat analysis were simply discussed[8].

In any case, one can always start from the basis provided by several of the official strategy documents issued by EU bodies, which together provide a wide range of threats and challenges, as shown in the following diagram:

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[8] 'Defending Europe: Analysing the Threats and strategic challenges facing the EU', *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, seminar report; February 2020.

European Security Strategy (2003)	Report on the implementation of the European Security Strategy (2008)	Global Strategy of the European Union (2016)
- Proliferation of weapons of mass destruction - Terrorism - Organised crime - Regional conflicts - Failed states	- Proliferation of weapons of mass destruction - Terrorism - Organised crime - Cybersecurity - Energy security - Climate change	- Proliferation of weapons of mass destruction - Terrorism - Organised crime - Cybersecurity - Energy security - Armed conflicts - Climate change - Fragile states - Hybrid threats - Maritime safety - Mass migration - Pandemics - Economic volatility - Demographics

However, the rapidly evolving strategic context requires an update of the above list, but more importantly, a prioritisation of threats and challenges, which is perhaps the most difficult point. Therefore, one of the risks is to avoid prioritising threats, in order to avoid arousing the sensitivities of member states.

In any case, the threat analysis should list both civilian and military threats, as well as the estimated time horizon for their survival (short, medium and long term). But here again we run into another potential risk: drawing up a list that is too exhaustive to accommodate all sensitivities without exception. Thus, we may end up with an overly lengthy document that, while pleasing everyone, does not serve to provide a real basis on which to build the strategic compass.

In this way, the process could end up producing a lowest common denominator analysis that only takes into account those threats on which all agree, in order to avoid

controversial issues. This would also result in a politically correct document, accepted by all, but of little or no value as a basis for further development. A clear example is provided by the particular case of Russia, which some states consider an existential threat (the Baltic Republics, Iceland, Poland, etc.), while for others it is a problematic partner (such as Germany and France).

The fact that the threat analysis is not part of the strategic compass, that it is to be developed by the HR assisted by SIAC and therefore does not need to be negotiated with Member States, as well as remaining a classified document, could facilitate its preparation. On the other hand, it could also make it difficult to be accepted by some Member States, which would condemn it to failure, as it would be tantamount to putting the cart before the horse, given the disparity in the different and divergent sensitivities, mentioned above. We should not lose sight of the fact that the document should serve to increase internal consensus and not so much as a communication tool, i.e. to promote common strategic thinking within the Union.

The strategic compass itself

As mentioned above, the strategic compass should drive and guide the implementation of the level of ambition defined in the Global Security Strategy[9], which envisages three priorities: responding to external conflicts and crises, developing partners' capabilities, and protecting the Union and its citizens. The idea is that such a compass will enable member states to define more specifically what the EU's objectives are in the fields of security and defence. The document is to be agreed at the Council at the end of the French presidency of the Council in mid-2022. The HR will be responsible for drafting this (assisted by the EEAS) with the cooperation of the Commission and the European Defence Agency "where appropriate".

To this end, four areas (called baskets) are initially envisaged: crisis management, capacity building, resilience and partnership. Each of the above-mentioned baskets must answer a series of questions:

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[9] Available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_es_.pdf

Baskets	Relevant questions
Crisis management	Operations on what scale and with what concurrence?
	What functional priority? (e.g. maritime security)
	What regional priority?
	What are the CSDP's connections with other policies?
	Future of the Battlegroups?
	Union command structures?
	How to boost the force generation process?
	Priorities in the implementation of the Civil Package?
Capacity building	What does strategic autonomy mean in terms of capacity development?
	What is the connection between capacities and crisis scenarios?
	How can PESCO and the European Defence Fund contribute to closing capability gaps?
	How to link the EU¡s capability planning process with NATO?
	What are the priorities for military mobility?
	Should the 1999/2004 Capability Target be revised?
Resilience	How does the EU contribute to territorial defence?
	How to articulate mutual assistance (Art. 42-7 TEU) and solidarity clauses (Art. 222 TFEU) in the light of Art. V of NATO?
	What lessons have been learned from civil-military cooperation during the pandemic?
	How to improve the EU's tools to deal with hybrid threats including disinformation?
	What could be the division of tasks/synergies between the EU and NATO in responding to a hybrid or cyber threat?
	How far and how far should the EU act together in space?
Partnership	How can NATO-EU cooperation be deepened despite political obstacles?
	What does a more strategic approach to partnership with third countries actually mean?
	Should there be a deeper, *sui generis* security and defence partnership with the UK and what would it entail?

If we look at the questions, we can see that they encompass issues of deep significance and will undoubtedly generate controversy. Some will require a difficult balancing of different threat perceptions, others will attempt to respond to a possible division of responsibilities between NATO and the EU, balancing civilian and military instruments. This may entail engaging in lengthy discussions and debates that could prevent the

definition of concrete options, which should be the goal, as the strategic compass should ultimately narrow its focus to security and defence.

In any case, whether the strategic compass will end up being just another document or not will depend on what is done next, because without the necessary political impetus, it will progressively lose interest and end up being shelved alongside other security and defence initiatives that turned out to be a dead letter. The key objective must be to specify the EU¡s political level of ambition in the areas of security and defence, which should include a clear definition of the level of military ambition. At the same time, but as secondary objectives, it should address how to address strategic gaps, bring together positions on threat interpretation and prioritisation, foster coherence between the Union's supranational and intergovernmental bodies and, finally, contribute to forging a common strategic culture.

It is clear that the Union is at a critical moment, which could be existential, and the commitment to the strategic compass, even if it succeeds, could end up being a flight forward from the Brussels administrative environment. Like other initiatives that, sold with great fanfare to give the impression that the European machinery is still in motion, end up running aground precisely because of the lack of political will on the part of the states. And they are reluctant to push for them because they do not align with their interests, a product of the different security ecosystems inhabited by the 27 partners, which leads them to interpret differently the panoply of threats and risks they believe they face.

Conclusions

The increasingly deteriorating arc of instability around Europe is raising European security awareness and prompting debate on issues that, until a few years ago, remained outside the EU's focus. The scenario for Europe is particularly worrying, as the new US administration has signalled its desire not to engage in scenarios where its core interests are not at stake. This should oblige the EU to equip itself with the tools to deal alone with those threats it does not share with the US hegemon, avoiding being dragged into scenarios where fundamental European interests are not threatened.

In order to provide itself with this capacity for geopolitical manoeuvre, the EU needs much greater strategic autonomy than it currently enjoys. Clearly, this would entail assuming that the EU is a major player on the world stage, capable of defending its interests at

home and abroad: a common vision of its future and of the threats it faces and could face in the short, medium and long term.

Unfortunately, at least in the short to medium term, European defence cannot guarantee the protection of the continent from a high-intensity threat from a major power, much less in the nuclear field. So its security will be inescapably intertwined with that which the US is willing to provide. The debate on strategic autonomy is mired in a false zero-sum dichotomy: "More Europe means less US."

In order to create a shared vision to forge a common strategic culture and clarify what kind of actor the Union should be on the world stage, a strategic compass is being developed, which is expected to bring Member States' views closer together. But whether or not it will end up playing a greater role will depend on the necessary political momentum that follows.

This will require even those who place all their trust in Washington to realise the inescapable responsibility of being able to act autonomously in large areas, some relatively remote parts of the continent.

Thus, the EU's strategic autonomy would not consist of acting outside the US, but in being able to act where and when European interests are at stake and Washington does not wish to intervene.

Even if successful, the initiative risks becoming just another mummy in the cupboards of the Brussels administrative structure, adding to the growing disaffection that Europeans are beginning to feel with their Common Security and Defence Policy[10].

José Luis Pontijas Calderón*
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[10] 'Euro-Skepticism and the future of Common Security and Defence Policy', *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*. Available at: https://www.georgetownjournalofinternationalaffairs.org/online-edition/euro-skepticism-and-the-future-of-the-common-security-and-defense-policy-dieter-dettke Last consulted on 28 October 2021.