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The new Strategic Compass leaves the EU disoriented

The Compass was supposed to give EU defence policy a sense of orientation. But it fails to answer crucial questions about the EU's international role

After intense discussions and tough negotiations, the European Union (EU) has finally managed to adopt its new Strategic Compass. Sometimes presented as a doctrine, sometimes as a white paper, the Strategic Compass is a document of some 40 pages that is supposed to give a direction to European defence, with the goal of reviving it and orienting its action.

This is not the first time that the EU has attempted this kind of doctrinal exercise. In the past, EU member states had already tried to kick-start European defence by drafting flagship strategic texts, but without ever moving beyond the starting line.

Examples include the Solana Doctrine in 2003, the Comprehensive Strategy in 2016, the Permanent Structured Cooperation in 2017, and – even earlier – the conclusions of the Cologne Summit in 1999 or the Lisbon Treaty itself, which entered into force in 2009. The texts produced on these occasions were intended to identify, once and for all, the priorities of the EU's defence policy in order to relaunch it. Why should anyone think that this time will be different?

A practice from across the Atlantic

To give an appropriate answer, one must first go back to the origins of these strategic documents. In fact, the idea of drafting a document to guide the EU's action was imported from the United States in the early 2000s – in the context of the Iraq war. At the time, the American president, George W. Bush, published a controversial strategy announcing the politico-military intentions of his administration. In 2003, the Europeans wanted to do the same. Like their big American brother, they too wrote their own doctrine, the first of its kind at EU level.

Unlike their allies on the other side of the Atlantic, the Europeans had to agree first of all on what they wanted to do together, and then try to figure out how they were going to do it.

In presenting their strategy to the world, however, the Americans had a completely different idea than the Europeans. The Bush administration's goal was certainly not to understand what it wanted to do in terms of defence and foreign policy. The Americans have always been very clear about this. Instead, the United States' release of the document was rather a communications exercise than about the specific content. It wanted to send political messages to the rest of the world, for friends and foes to take note and act accordingly.

In contrast, the Europeans were on a completely different track with the Solana Doctrine. Unlike their allies on the other side of the Atlantic, they had to agree first of all on what they wanted to do together, and then try to figure out how they were going to do it. In short, they had to answer ontological questions, in the hope of clarifying the very meaning of their project for a common defence policy at EU level.

An existential problem the Compass will not solve

The fact that Europeans periodically return to the need for an EU-level strategic document demonstrates that they have never really managed to solve their existential conundrums. Then as now, they are still trying to find themselves. They have not yet understood the EU's identity and role on the international scene. And when they are confused and don't know what to do, Europeans tend to want to write strategies in the hope that they will create some clarity.

The problem, however, is that before we can understand what the EU should do in the world, we have to understand what it is. And the new Strategic Compass will certainly not give us the answer.

The Compass is divided into five parts:

First, in its introduction, it sets out a shared understanding of the threats facing Europe, the result of intense negotiations between the member states. The EU then announces a strengthening of its capacity for action, notably by creating a multinational rapid reaction force of 5,000 men. Structurally, this has the same drawbacks as the battlegroups that are available since 2007 – and have never been deployed. A strengthening of the command and control capabilities is also mentioned.

Thirdly, the EU says it wants to strengthen its cooperation in areas such as intelligence, cyber, space, the fight against disinformation, and hybrid threats. The fourth chapter is perhaps the most interesting. It addresses the issue of joint investment in military capabilities, recalling that the EU has new tools to promote them. The idea of spending better and more on defence is also mentioned in the text, as is the idea of strengthening member states' military planning at EU level. Finally, the last chapter deals with the EU's strategic partnerships with NATO and the United Nations, but also between the EU and other regional organisations and at bilateral level.

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The elements addressed in the Strategic Compass are of course important. However, they do not address any of the existential questions mentioned above. Once again, the member states have been careful to dodge them. The question that European capitals will have to answer at some point is simple: what is the place of their common military policies in the wider process of European integration? Should European defence be seen as a stage in the process that the EU is supposed to embody, or is it simply a matter of coordinating the military policies of its member states, which are called upon to remain sovereign and distinct from one another? In other words, is it a cooperation or an integration project?

These questions are not insignificant. As long as Europeans do not clarify to themselves, and to their allies, what their common defence policies are supposed to represent within the European political construction, they will not be able to understand what they should and should not do. And, by the same token, they will not be able to distinguish the role of the EU from that of NATO.

The fact that Europeans have never wanted to decide such an existential question has a name: 'constructive ambiguity'. Henry Kissinger defined this concept as the deliberate willingness of diplomatic actors involved in a negotiation to remain vague about the ultimate purpose of the initiative so that it could move forward despite the differences it raises. This notion has undeniably been useful in the past. Without it, EU member states could never have launched common military policies. However, the constructive ambiguity that dominates European defence cannot last forever. In the long run, politically ambiguous initiatives always end up fuelling misunderstandings, which are not constructive, but rather

paralysing.

Mundane exercise or major reform?

Another limitation of the Strategic Compass lies in the importance it has been given and the expectations it has raised. For several years now, Europe has been confronted with strategic surprises that turn it upside down and force it to run after history rather than anticipate it. On 19 November 2019, when EU member states launched the process leading to the adoption of the Compass, most of them were looking at Moscow only briefly, although not all had the same opinion about Russia.

Since 24 February 2022, however, after Vladimir Putin decided to attack Ukraine, all eyes have been unanimously focused in the same direction: the Kremlin. As a result, the Compass had to be urgently amended, even though it had not yet been adopted. The aim was to acknowledge the new geopolitical situation and to adopt a more explicit language towards Russia, which had been elevated to the rank of the continent's main security threat.

The war in Ukraine is therefore emblematic of the main problem facing Europeans in their doctrinal exercise. The idea of setting a strategic document in stone, while waiting for the next strategic surprise, risks being a sterile exercise. Yesterday the finger was pointed at Islamist terrorism. Today it is pointed at Moscow. And tomorrow?

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The unpredictability of international relations does not mean that the EU should deprive itself of an in-depth reflection on the direction it intends to give to its foreign and defence policies – far from it. But such an exercise cannot be presented as 'the' major reform that will finally kick-start the development of a serious common defence policy. Rather, it should be presented for what it is, or for what it should be: a routine politico-administrative activity, designed to feed a constant dialogue between European decision-makers. The Strategic Compass, however, was not presented in this way. It was announced with great fanfare as the flagship initiative to unblock a European defence that has been stagnant for over twenty years.

When it finds itself at an impasse, the EU has an unfortunate habit of wanting to drape the most banal political and administrative activity in the clothes of a major reform. In the short term, this approach is

undoubtedly profitable, since it can calm public opinion in search of reassuring answers. But in the long run, creating expectations that will be disappointed risks having a boomerang effect, which will ultimately fuel sarcasm and scepticism towards Brussels.



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