



## The European Union's Strategic Compass

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### Summary

- \* *The Strategic Compass is the EU's latest attempt to streamline its security and defence strategy. It is designed to meet the challenges of an increasingly volatile world and to support the establishment of credible crisis management capabilities. The Compass envisions the development of limited military instruments, but stops short of establishing a military force to manage international conflict.*

### Background/Challenge

- The Strategic Compass was first discussed during the German Presidency of the EU Council in 2020. Its purpose is to narrow the gap between ambition and reality in EU security and defence and to foster a common European “strategic culture”. In early 2021, the External Action Service issued a report outlining four key issue areas to be addressed: Crisis Management, Resilience, Capability Development, and Partnerships.
- The Strategic Compass was officially released in March 2022 under the French Council Presidency. In its final stages, it was heavily influenced by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which caused a dramatic deterioration of the European security environment. Russia's military action strengthened cohesion among EU members as well as the Union's commitment to make a quantum leap forward and increase its capabilities and willingness to act.
- Steps had been taken in recent years to strengthen capabilities, but these initiatives failed to empower the EU with a truly effective crisis management and deterrence role. The EU remained underequipped and its strategy fragmented. Without the US and NATO, EU member states continue to lack critical strategic enablers. For example, the French-led *Operation Barkhane* in the Sahel heavily relied on US intelligence, and the Europeans were unable to complete evacuations from Kabul in 2021 without US support.

### KEY FINDINGS

- ◇ The Strategic Compass aims to act as a barometer for both the member states' and the EU's ambitions in security and defence policy. One of its initial purposes was to **bridge the gap in security perceptions** among the Union's members and promote the emergence of a truly European strategic culture.
- ◇ The Compass was a key deliverable of the French Presidency. While the **2003 European Security Strategy** and the **2016 Global Strategy** endeavoured to lay the groundwork for a shared vision and common action, they failed to promote understanding of the broad array of threats and challenges facing the EU as a single entity. Russia's invasion of Ukraine partly eased the achievement of this task.
- ◇ The Strategic Compass promotes a rapid and more flexible decision-making process. One its key features is the development of an **EU Rapid Deployment Capacity**. Like the Strategic Compass itself—which followed the EU Global Strategy—this is also an evolution of an existing structure, namely the EU Battlegroup initiative, which was officially launched in 2004 but never implemented. The new Rapid Deployment Capacity will comprise 5,000 troops and is designed to be more flexible and include specialist units as well as air and sea capabilities.
- ◇ The EU Rapid Deployment Capacity will be able to **deploy to a wide range of scenarios**, such as the rescue of EU citizens from a civil war zone or the stabilization of a country in the immediate aftermath of hostilities. The Rapid Deployment Capacity should be able to act rapidly and robustly whenever a crisis erupts, with partners if possible and alone when necessary.



## KEY FINDINGS (continued)

- ◇ The Compass aims to boost the Union’s **intelligence capabilities**. It foresees the development of hybrid toolbox and response teams bringing together different instruments to detect and respond to a broad range of hybrid threats, the development of an EU space strategy for security and defence, and the strengthening of the EU’s role as a maritime security actor, including in the Indo-Pacific.
- ◇ Member states have committed to substantially **enhance their defence expenditures** to match the Union’s collective ambition to reduce critical military and civilian capability gaps and strengthen Europe’s technological and industrial base. The EU will provide further incentives for member states to engage in collaborative capability development and jointly invest in strategic enablers and next generation capabilities. An important role will be played by the European Peace Facility—a new and off-budget instrument created in 2021 for the financing of common missions—to enhance the EU’s ability to conduct military operations and support partners.
- ◇ The Compass aims to **strengthen existing partnerships and to establish new ones**, arguing that strategic autonomy goes hand-in-hand with strengthening cooperation with partners such as NATO, the UN and other regional institutions, including the OSCE, the AU, and ASEAN. It also promises to develop more tailored bilateral partnerships with like-minded countries and strategic partners, such as the US, Canada, Norway, the UK, and Japan.
- ◇ The Compass identifies ambitious **medium and long-term objectives**, which include a strengthening of the EU’s agency in contested domains like cyberspace, outer space, and the seas; reducing strategic dependencies; streamlining decision making, for example by encouraging ad hoc coalitions in order to overcome the unanimity issue; and improving the mandates for European operations and missions. It envisions mechanisms to measure progress, such as an annual progress report by the European Council.

## Policy Implications

- ◇ The Compass lays out a common strategic vision for EU security and defence; it sets up objectives in key areas along a timeline, focusing particularly on the ability to act, invest, secure, and partner with third parties. It lays out capabilities worthy of investment, such as force protection, reconnaissance or surveillance.
- ◇ The Strategic Compass highlights that NATO “remains the foundation of collective defence for its members”. In this regard, there should be no discrepancies between the Strategic Compass and NATO’s New Strategic Concept that will be adopted in Madrid in June. In the Compass, the notion of EU strategic autonomy is interpreted not as independence from the US, but in close synergy with NATO.
- ◇ The ever-present risk is that the Compass might prove another grandiloquent and cumbersome bureaucratic document and that, without supra-national integration in Europe, the EU will remain merely a junior partner to the US and NATO in a time of deepening strategic competition.

### Further Reading

Council of the European Union. 2022. [A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence](#). Brussels.

Paul, Amanda, et al. 2022. [“Will the Strategic Compass Be a Game Changer for EU Security and Defence?”](#) Brussels: European Policy Centre.

Witney, Nick. 2022. [“The EU’s Strategic Compass: Brand New, Already Obsolete.”](#) Berlin: European Council on Foreign Relations.



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