

Europe's Strategic Compass: Merits and Shortcomings

by Riccardo Perissich

Europe's "Strategic Compass" proposes a number of initiatives to enable the EU to act in the security and defence domain and confront the many challenges impacting European interests. The document, prepared by the European External Action Service (EEAS) under the responsibility of Josep Borrell, the EU High Representative and Vice President of the Commission, will be debated by defence and foreign ministers over the next few months and subsequently adopted as an official strategy statement sometime during the French Presidency of the European Council next year.

Since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the EU has further expanded its foreign commitments. The treaty set the foundations for the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Further procedures and bodies have subsequently been established: among them the EEAS, the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice President of the European Commission, the European Military

Committee and the European Defence Fund (EDF) financed by the EU budget. Several projects (a total of 60) have also been launched under various forms of variable geometry under the heading of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO).

On top of this, a number of bilateral agreements between member states in the defence field also need to be considered. While not insignificant, results have remained modest. One reason is that the multiplication of initiatives and procedures that aim to re-launch European defence integration and develop a common EU strategic culture makes it hard to streamline the process. More importantly, for all the rhetoric, political will has been lacking: words and concepts seem to have different meanings for different people. The concept of European "strategic autonomy" is a good example.¹

¹ See, for instance, Riccardo Perissich, "L'Europe au risque de l'ambiguïté stratégique", in *Le Grand Continent*, 4 October 2021, <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/?p=122299>.

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Guiding principles and background

The underlining logic that led to the development of the Strategic Compass is lucid and on the whole correct. The current crisis of the multilateral order and the multiplication of threats facing the EU and its member states are real, as is the revival of nationalism and great power confrontation. Efforts to operationalise such logic are also welcome. While precise details are somewhat scarce – after all we are only talking about a strategy document – some important guidelines are advanced.

First of all, the document has overcome the typical European tendency to be very long on “soft power” while neglecting the military dimensions of security and defence, which in this case provides its main focus. From an operational point of view, three aspects are worth noting: (a) the development of a rapid intervention force of up to 5,000 troops; (b) a strengthened emphasis on maritime cooperation and (c) the importance given to the military dimension of new technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), the space and cyber domains, including the threat of disinformation via social media.

Related to this, is a suggestion that EU member states should do more to share intelligence and improve response times against new forms of hybrid threats. Yet, there is still no consensus in the wider debate, even in the US, about the impact of these technologies and particularly of AI, which still lacks a precise definition. Equally, it is unclear what role these tools could play in warfare or their impact on conventional

deterrence, since some fear that the combined possibility of human and machine error could lower the threshold for dangerous escalations. This focus is crucial, also because Europe is lagging behind in almost all of these dual use technologies. It is therefore of vital importance that they become a priority for both the EU's industrial development and its strategic posture.

The shortcomings

Turning to the document's shortcomings, the first and probably most important challenge relates to credibility. The imbalance between identified threats and the capabilities the Compass proposes to deploy is rather obvious. An EU rapid intervention force numbering 5,000 troops will be hard pressed to make much of a difference. So why has the EEAS and the Commission proceeded in this manner?

The reason is largely tied to the still unresolved issue of Europe's strategic relationship with United States and as a consequence, with NATO. In the document, NATO is mentioned as part of a long list of entities and countries with which the EU should cooperate: from the UN, to ASEAN, to the African Union and many others. Admittedly, NATO is treated as very important, a sort of “best friend” among friends, but also as something that is somewhat different from us and with which we can and should cooperate, but not too closely. This is difficult to understand. A majority of NATO states are also members of the EU and conversely the majority of EU members are also NATO

allies, and many still regard the alliance as the main pillar of their defence.

Some Europeans resent NATO as an instrument of US dominance. On the other hand, some in the US, in non-EU NATO members and even in many EU states, especially in the east and north, fear that a strengthened EU role in security and defence would weaken NATO. Both narratives are ultimately based on misconceptions. Nobody in his right mind would believe that the EU is capable for the foreseeable future of assuring its defence without the participation of the US and equally, few believe that the US is truly intending to disengage from Europe. The recent reaction to Russian military pressure on the Ukraine border proves this.

It cannot be denied that we are in a complex situation, loaded with misunderstandings that date back to the Obama years, were amplified under Trump and persist today with Biden. Unless they are quickly resolved, they could drive the two sides of the Atlantic further apart as well as creating deep divisions within the EU itself.

Taking all this into account, it is regrettable that the strategic compass does little to clarify the relationship between EU defence, NATO and the US. A better approach could have been to conceive the new EU security strategy not as a separate and parallel enterprise with regards to NATO, but as a contribution to the creation of a European pillar within the alliance.

This understanding was adopted in the "Quirinale Treaty" recently signed by

France and Italy.² If Rome and Paris can say it, why not the Commission? Such an approach would entail a recognition that NATO, while remaining central, cannot provide responses to all the security challenges the EU is facing and that increased EU capabilities are therefore required should there be a need for Europe to act alone.

One can understand the political sensitivities that contributed to this decision, but unless the question is clarified the prospects for a quantum leap in the development of the EU's security policy will remain limited. The Strategic Compass could have explained that a bigger European security posture lacks credibility unless all member states increase their defence expenditure in accordance with commitments made within NATO. On the other hand, it could also have underlined that an integrated European effort would not only exploit economies of scale, but also stress the political value of the European pillar for NATO more broadly. By mitigating a perceived dominance by the US, such an approach may also make defence budget increases easier to accept by European publics. All of this would have gone a long way to mitigate the problem of credibility.

The timing would also have been right because NATO is engaged in an important strategic review of its own that, in a global perspective, is likely to include China and the Indo-Pacific. In this, the Strategic Compass could have

² Italian Government, *Italy-France Treaty Signed at the Quirinale Palace*, 26 November 2021, <https://www.governo.it/en/node/18662>.

been seen as a European contribution to that process. In this regard, an EU–NATO joint declaration will be adopted in the next months. Perhaps it will help to clarify this puzzle. Finally, such a joint declaration would also help to re-establish a basis for cooperation with the UK that has been weakened after Brexit and even more so after the AUKUS incident.

China and the Indo-Pacific

This leads us to China and, more widely, the Indo-Pacific, another shortcoming of the document. The truth is that what the EU likes to call its Indo-Pacific strategy is in reality largely limited to the trade and economic dimensions. The reason is a lack of consensus about the “China question” and how to handle it.

Predictably, the document contains the already liturgical mantra of China as a “partner”, “competitor” and “strategic rival”. However, it is hard to see where the rivalry is. Beijing’s penetration in Africa is not mentioned and neither are Taiwan and Hong Kong. Freedom of navigation in the South China sea is mentioned, but no clear explanation of who is threatening this freedom is defined.

Even the new German coalition agreement is more explicit on some of these issues. If one looks at the European debate, some member states have focussed on the economic and trade aspects, ignoring the security implications. Others, particularly France, seem to think that the EU could acknowledge the Chinese threat, but pursue a strategy parallel if not

independent to that of the US.

Yet, none of these postures are sustainable. To ignore the strategic threat, or being satisfied to leave the whole issue to the US, does not make sense because the aggressive nationalism deployed by China impacts our economic interests and the security implications extend well beyond Asia. Also, there is the human rights dimension that concerns a large part of our public opinion.

The concept of a parallel or independent strategy is illusionary. It would have to be supported by significant political clout that even France lacks despite being the only member of the EU that has a presence in the area. Furthermore, to be credible, we would need local allies. Those Asian countries that seem reluctant to side openly with the US, do so because they are reluctant to enter into any type of alliance and a link with Europe would do little to change their calculus.

Nobody has been able to explain why our strategic interest in Asia should differ from that of the US in geopolitical or economic terms. One of the main drivers of the aggressive Chinese nationalism is the belief in the irreversible decline of Europe and the US. Nothing encourages more aggressive action than further signs of transatlantic disunity. A connection with the US strategy does not need to be a-critical, but could give us the possibility to influence their policy in Asia according to our interests.

For instance, it may allow Europe to pressure the US to correct the

protectionist posture that Biden has inherited from Trump since the abandonment of the Trans Pacific Partnership. Finally, the US and China, despite their differences, are bound to cooperate in a number of areas, such as climate change. There is also the critical issue of procedures and rules that are necessary to prevent unwanted incidents or miscalculations. They existed with the USSR and are even more important with China. As Europeans, we do not want that dialogue to be exclusively bilateral.

Member state approaches

The shortcomings of the Strategic Compass show that the mood of member states, particularly on China and Russia, moves faster than in the Commission and more generally in the "Brussel's bubble". The speed is however different and important differences remain.

As often happens, the main burden falls on larger members. Italy is often described as weak due to its structural problems and political instability. However, its strong credentials as a constant supporter of both NATO and the EU, could increase its influence, provided progress on the domestic front continues and consolidates under the Draghi government.

For Germany, the problem is to overcome its constant temptation to disconnect economic interests from their geopolitical and security implications. *Wandel durch Handel* (change through trade) is a noble concept, but is not suited to the present environment. Germany's posture

has changed in recent times and the agreement reached by the new government coalition suggests that more change will come, particularly as far as Russia and China are concerned.

This leaves France. The constant temptation to interpret the world and Europe in neo-Gaullist terms is illogical, counterproductive and a recipe for European division. No other country would gain more than France from the promotion of an EU strategic consensus based on connecting rather than distancing from the US. It would help to give substance to the concept of "strategic autonomy", while reassuring members, including those on the eastern border, for which NATO is of paramount importance.

It would also set France, because of its status as a nuclear power and permanent UN Security Council member, as the inevitable EU leader in matters of security; as is the case for Germany when it comes to the economy. Perhaps it is too much to expect from a country that faces crucial elections next year. That said, a re-elected Macron should have the authority to move things in a decisive way. If this comes about, France as well as Europe, NATO and the US would benefit.

9 December 2021

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