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Kaim, Markus; Kempin, Ronja

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Compass or Wind Chime?

An Analysis of the Draft “Strategic Compass” of the EU

Markus Kaim and Ronja Kempin

In March 2022, the 27 member states of the European Union (EU) want to adopt a “Strategic Compass” (SC) that is intended to make the Union a provider of international security by 2030 and strengthen its strategic sovereignty. The first draft of this document has been available since mid-November, and it shows serious deficits: strategic fragmentation, over-institutionalization, and diffusion of responsibility remain hallmarks of EU security and defense policy. In the upcoming revision of the compass, Berlin is called upon in particular to clarify its status and set a clear target of ambition. Otherwise, the Strategic Compass is likely to encourage an EU security policy whose motto is “Everything can be done, nothing must be done.”

On November 15, 2021, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP), Josep Borrell, presented the draft document to the foreign and defense ministers of the EU member states: the “Strategic Compass for Security and Defence – For a EU that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security.” The aim of this document is to strengthen the EU’s security and defense policy by 2030. At its core, the compass aims to answer three questions: What challenges and threats does the EU face today and in the near future? How can it better pool its resources to meet them? And how can it assert Europe’s influence as a regional and global player more strongly than before?

Genesis of the Document

At the request of the German government, the EU defense ministers tasked Borrell on June 16, 2020, with drawing up a security policy position and setting out the operational orientation of the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) in the form of a military doctrine. The document is thus intended to flesh out the 2016 “Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy” (EUGS). Its task is firstly to establish a consensus on the common goals of the EU states in the policy field of “security” in a broader sense – that is, in crisis management, in the strengthening of partners in international relations, and in the protection of the Union and its citizens – and secondly to form a common strategic framework for the future direction of this policy field.



The drafting of the SC was divided into three phases. Starting in the summer of 2020, it was the responsibility of the HR/VP to prepare a joint threat analysis. It served as the basis for the second phase – a dialogue process of the EU member states starting in January 2021 on the four areas of crisis management, resilience, capabilities, and partnerships. The 28-page document, presented in November 2021, bundles the discussions into five chapters, entitled “The World We Face,” “Act,” “Secure,” “Invest,” and “Partners.” The current third phase gives the member states until March 2022 the opportunity to submit requests for changes. The process is also an expression of Franco-German cooperation in that Berlin has persuaded President Emmanuel Macron to complete the process during the French EU Presidency in the first half of 2022, and the joint action of Berlin and Paris thus represents the umbrella of the SC process.

Threat Analysis

Even though the final text will not be available until spring, the draft already documents a clear change in the EU’s view of the world. Compared to the 2016 EUGS, which painted a picture of international relations in which the EU’s “soft power” seemed to be an effective tool, structural changes now come to the fore. The “return of power politics” is now the phenomenon that Brussels places at the center of its security policy planning. According to the draft, this new power politics not only includes traditional military means, but also new forms of threat, as the EU recently experienced on its external border with Belarus. Such threats make the classic distinction between war and peace increasingly difficult. Europe, whose economic and demographic importance in the world is declining, must assert itself in this changed environment.

The analysis is based on two dynamics: On the one hand, there is the increasing bipolarity between the United States (US)

and China, which is shaping international competition in virtually all areas. On the other hand, there is a multipolar dynamic in which a growing number of actors are trying to expand their respective spheres of political influence. These two factors are also changing the security policy parameters of the EU: The member states are experiencing a period of strategic competition and complex threats that affect the security of their populations and promote geopolitical shifts and instability on the Union’s borders. The spectrum of threats has become more diverse and unpredictable. Thus, while interdependence remains important, it is increasingly conflictual and weaponized: vaccines, data, and technological standards are now instruments of political competition.

This return to power politics also means that countries such as China, Russia, and Turkey are once again arguing on the basis of historical claims and spheres of influence, instead of adhering to internationally agreed rules and principles and working together for international peace and security. In the meantime, not only the oceans, but also outer space and the cyber sphere are increasingly contested areas. The EU must adapt to this highly confrontational system, as there is a danger of being overtaken by geopolitical competitors. The goal is to develop an EU that can act as an international security provider.

In the wake of this commitment, the Strategic Compass firstly reviews all the regional orders of the international system and their respective security challenges. In this way, it remains largely rooted in the traditional approach of the CSDP. The political institutions of the EU as well as the envisaged military and technological capabilities are primarily intended to serve the goal of managing crises in Europe’s periphery. The already publicized proposal of an EU Rapid Deployment Capacity of 5,000 soldiers underscores this.

In a second strand, those security challenges are listed that are frequently and sometimes imprecisely or simply wrongly described as “hybrid”: disinformation,

propaganda, election interference, cyber-attacks, and others. Here, the EU focuses on the protection of its citizens and thus expands the conceivable threat scenarios more than the EUGS. However, these remain secondary to the SC's argumentative trajectory and policy conclusions.

Finally, the paper urges the EU to take on more responsibility for its own security by acting in its neighborhood and beyond. Using the term "strategic autonomy," it refers to the guiding principle of European debates in recent years.

Shortcomings of the Draft

The Strategic Compass is the result of a process designed to achieve consensus — this also means that the member states were able to negotiate into the SC in an unconnected manner all the concerns that were particularly important to them. In the context of the United Nations, "Christmas tree mandates" for peace operations are well known, but they do not do justice to the realities on the ground and have no strategic focus. By analogy, one could speak of a "Christmas tree strategy" in the case of the SC. The four most striking shortcomings of the draft are analyzed below.

The Lack of Political Will

In terms of its internal structure and foreign policy self-perception, the EU is not well-prepared for an era of great power rivalries, since it was created as a counter-draft to the European great power politics of the first half of the 20th century. It is an association of states, still decides on its foreign policy by unanimity, and has so far largely dispensed with instruments of hard power.

Against this background, it is surprising that the intergovernmental orientation of foreign policy plays no role at all in the SC. Thus, as a political as well as analytical starting point, one could have acknowledged the achievements of the individual EU members in the field of security, em-

phasized the added value of cooperation within the framework of the CSDP, or stressed the challenge of repeatedly generating the political will necessary for joint action.

By failing to do so, the Strategic Compass rather casually overlooks the main problem of the EU's security policy: Neither the multitude of existing and newly created institutions on the part of the EU, nor a lack of military capabilities on the part of the member states are (or were) responsible for the fact that the CSDP's record of effectiveness is modest. It is indisputable that, above all, the lack of political will on the part of the EU states to make use of available opportunities means that the Union has limited ability to meet the challenges posed by its geopolitical adversaries. All in all, the SC assumes the EU's ability to act in crisis situations and suggests a political will to act that does not necessarily exist.

In the medium term, it would be important to redesign the EU's institutional framework in such a way that a majority of states can make decisions on behalf of all members without compromising legitimacy and support. Ideas developed in recent years to this end aim to speed up decision-making procedures. One proposal was to introduce majority voting in foreign and security policy, another to establish a European Security Council — both approaches that have so far failed to gain majority support among the EU-27.

That the authors of the SC are also aware of this deficit is indicated by the considerations on making the CSDP more flexible and on using Article 44 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU). According to this article, the Council may unanimously "entrust the execution of a mission to a group of Member States which so desire and have the capabilities required for such a mission." First, the member states would have to agree on the scenarios for which they want to allow this treaty-immanent flexibilization of the CSDP. Proposals on this have been on the table since 2015. If Article 44 TEU were to be successfully applied, it could provide a strong impetus in the

medium term for force integration, defense-industrial cooperation among EU states, and decision-making procedures in the CSDP. However, it remains uncertain whether this will provide the EU with a way to assume an independent security and defense policy role among the major powers.

Lack of Prioritization and Unclear Level of Ambition

Two closely interrelated problems have so far prevented the SC from fulfilling its most important function, namely to provide strategic guidance for the EU's security policy, both internally and externally.

First, the security policy goals are not clearly prioritized in the paper. It does identify two developments – the US-China rivalry and the multipolarity of the international order – as the greatest challenges. However, this analysis is not taken into account in the subsequent security policy conclusions, leaving unanswered questions such as: What are the consequences of this change in Washington's security policy priorities? What would be the consequences of a military escalation in the Sino-American conflict? What would it mean for the EU if the US withdrew troops from Europe on a large scale in view of this priority?

Second, the document makes extensive reference to the EU's existing and yet-to-be-created crisis management capabilities, but it ignores the question of the level of ambition of potential military operations: For what kind of operations are the above-mentioned 5,000 EU Rapid Deployment Capacity soldiers intended? The SC gives no indication whether they are to be deployed for a short-term evacuation operation, as in Kabul in August 2021; for a long-term stabilization operation, as in the Sahel; to enforce a protection zone for civilians in a country experiencing civil war; or for traditional peacekeeping, as defined by the United Nations, to name just four possible deployment scenarios.

This problem becomes even more obvious when the focus is shifted away from crisis management and it is emphasized

that the EU is determined to react to acts of aggression and malicious actions against one of its member states in accordance with Article 42 (7) TEU. With this reference, the SC expands the CSDP task catalog even further by adding to it a military response to armed attacks on the territory of a member state as well as a hitherto unspecified military assistance obligation.

It becomes even more confusing when the various possible attempts to influence the political sovereignty of the Union and its members from the outside by non-military means are listed. One can certainly argue whether countering such threats should be the priority of the CSDP and why the EU seems better suited than its member states or other international organizations to counter them. But without a clear prioritization, the EU's security policy threatens to be one of "everything can be done, nothing must be done."

Over-institutionalization and Diffusion of Responsibility

The impression of a further fragmentation of the CSDP is reinforced by the large number of new projects identified by the Strategic Compass. By 2030, the EU and its member states are to have implemented more than 40 goals in the areas of "Action", "Security", "Investment", and "Partners" (see four charts at <https://bit.ly/SWP22StratCompass>). According to this ambitious roadmap, the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity is to be built up between 2022 and 2025, the command structures are to be strengthened, and the decision-making procedures for the deployment of the CSDP missions and operations are to be designed in such a way that decisions can be made more quickly and flexibly. Financially, more solidarity is to be established between those member states that deploy forces abroad – regardless of whether these take place within the framework of the EU or in that of a European-led ad hoc coalition – and those that are not prepared to do so.

This acknowledgement that the Union's ability to act in the CSDP has not been suf-

ficiently supported by the member states and that they have shown too little solidarity among themselves is undoubtedly one of the strengths of the draft. For too long, member states have lacked this honesty. At the same time, however, the SC remains on the path of incrementally developing the CSDP. Numerous examples show that this path taken by the member states has so far proved to be unsuccessful: The implementation of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), for example, has been slow. Since its launch in December 2017, the PESCO states have agreed upon a total of 60 projects in four phases, in which they want to close the capability gaps of the CSDP. In September 2020, those projects that were announced between 2017 and 2020 were subjected to a strategic review. The result was sobering: At best, only one-third of the projects are likely to be implemented. Moreover, the member states have so far shown little effort to translate the coherence envisaged on paper between the Coordinated Annual Defense Review, PESCO, and the European Defense Fund into practice and thus allow synergies to emerge.

An uncertain level of military ambition and the continuing lack of a political framework give rise to fears that the implementation of the new projects enlisted in the SC will also fall short of the expectations of the EU's international partners: Who is responsible for implementing these new measures? Who will determine in what format and at what time the EU member states will hold military maneuvers? Will all members participate in the planning and execution of the exercises? Where will the many new "toolboxes" be located?

The Strategic Compass is pinning all its hopes on annual meetings between the High Representative and the defense ministers of the EU member states. These meetings shall assess the status of implementation of the defense initiatives adopted since 2016. If this approach remains unsuccessful, the SC is likely only to encourage further bureaucratization of the CSDP and a diffusion of responsibility for its further

development and implementation. Moreover, it would cause the CSDP to fall behind on the growing number of measures and initiatives for which the EU Commission assumes responsibility. As early as November 2016, the Commission presented a defense action plan aimed at developing and expanding European security and defense policy by integrating the defense-related industrial, procurement, and research policies of the member states. Continuing on this course are the "Directorate General for Defense Industry and Space" (DG DEFIS) and the "Directorate General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology" (DG CONNECT), established in 2020. While DG DEFIS is tasked with ensuring the competitiveness and innovation of the European defense industry and the implementation of the EU space program, DG CONNECT successfully drives EU policy in the areas of the digital single market, cybersecurity, digital science, and innovation.

In this way, the Commission is attempting, on the one hand, to circumvent the limitations of European defense policy and the existing reservations of some member states against greater cooperation and integration and to justify its legislative proposals with internal market-related approaches. Second, it seeks to shift the focus of European security and defense policy from a policy field dominated by member states to a supranational one. The new German government must now critically examine whether such a shift in the orientation of the CSDP – namely away from crisis management toward resilience and independent control of cyberspace and outer space – is in line with its priorities and whether it favors a transfer of competencies in the policy area.

Autonomy versus Partnerships

Finally, among the commitments that the Strategic Compass is urging for the EU to become a provider of international security is the development of its partnerships. In the fourth chapter, the document notes on

the one hand that partners will benefit from a strong EU. On the other hand, partners, for their part, could benefit the EU in upholding rules-based multilateralism, enforcing international norms and standards, and contributing to peace and security worldwide. Similar to the threat analysis at the beginning, the document takes a 360-degree view of the world from this perspective, promising many things without revealing strategic priorities.

The premise of all these efforts is supposed to be a shared understanding of an integrated approach when it comes to solving crises and building security and defense capabilities. Beyond this precondition, however, the goals of these cooperative relationships remain largely general. Above all, it remains unclear why this form of partnerships is supposed to help the EU deal with the two dynamics outlined above or increase its strategic sovereignty.

But also from the partners' perspective, reading the SC is likely to raise the question of what added value cooperation with the Union brings to them. Will the EU stand by them operationally or by supplying arms if terrorist actors carry out attacks against state institutions or critical infrastructure, if third states seek to destroy societal cohesion through targeted disinformation campaigns, if trade routes or transfer points are blocked, disarmament treaties or territorial integrity violated? Are military maneuvers by some member states in the Indo-Pacific, for example, sufficient to guarantee the EU the position of a security provider in today's world?

Politically, however, the most worrying aspect is that – in the process of drafting the SC – it was apparently not possible to overcome the differences that exist among the EU states with regard to the question of how the CSDP should relate to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and thus to the US. The document clearly shows an effort to speak positively about the Atlantic Alliance. Not only should the bilateral cooperation agenda be expanded, but an appropriate exchange of information should be at the core of cooperation. This should enable the EU and NATO to

conduct joint exercises. A few pages earlier, however, the SC calls for “[s]trategic dependencies to be reduced and our technological sovereignty to be increased.” Probably for this reason, there are no references in the document to how transatlantic cooperation in arms design and procurement can be improved. Moreover, the SC does not say a word about the deadlocks that have existed for years in relations between the two organizations. In view of the US administration under President Joseph Biden, which is the first American administration to support the further development of European security and defense policy toward greater autonomy, the SC reads like a missed opportunity here.

By contrast, Chancellor Olaf Scholz's government appears to be rather skeptical of European autonomy efforts and is relying on the familiar. For example, the coalition agreement states with remarkable clarity that the transatlantic partnership with the US is a central pillar of German security policy. The new government advocates a renewal and dynamization of transatlantic relations in order to stabilize the rules-based international order, counter authoritarian developments, and intensify cooperation in the EU's eastern and southern neighborhoods. This does not sound like a strategic reorientation of German security policy under the banner of European strategic sovereignty.

The French Perspective

In January 2022, the revision of the Strategic Compass has begun with a meeting of EU foreign and defense ministers in Brest. France will take the opportunity to continue to put its stamp on the document until its adoption by the European Council in March 2022. Even in the November draft version, Paris was able to ensure that the EU's security and defense policy goes beyond the treaty framework of the CSDP. This can be seen in the passages on space and satellite policy, which Paris uses to channel EU funding to its space industry.

It can also be seen in the fact that, according to the paper, European-led ad hoc coalitions will also be able to claim their expenses for military missions through EU common costs in the future. Since 2017, Paris has also been working to give concrete form to the obligation to provide assistance (Article 42 (7) TEU).

In the upcoming drafting of the final version, Paris is also likely to insist on setting ambitious timetables for core strategic capabilities. Moreover, the Macron government has long been pushing for a level of ambition in security and defense policy that would allow the EU to immunize itself and its neighborhood against attempts by third parties to exert political as well as strategic influence, and that would enable it to credibly pursue its interests even in more remote regions such as the Indo-Pacific.

Recommendations

The new German government should take advantage of the window of opportunity that will open up during the revision of the Strategic Compass by March 2022. Specifically, it should use the negotiations to:

- demand clarity on the status of the document. This recommendation may sound odd, but what is more strange is that the SC, with its title that obliquely conflates two concepts (a strategy defines goals and the means to achieve them; a compass merely helps to find the way from one point to another), leaves unclear what it is supposed to be: a policy-field-specific derivation of the EUGS, a work program for Brussels institutions until 2030, or a signal to the rest of the world regarding the EU's security policy goals?
- push for clarification of the regional scope of the SC or prioritization accordingly. If one follows the threat analysis of the document as well as the chapter on partnerships, one must inevitably get the impression that the EU is a globally active security provider. However, the operational conclusions leave little doubt that the focus of the document is realis-

tically on the immediate European neighborhood. In this way, the EU threatens to raise false expectations among itself and others: While it has global interests, it will not be able to act autonomously across the globe in terms of security policy.

- also, in terms of function, push for prioritization. It is not yet clear what, in the view of the member states, will be the central security challenge of the coming years, to which the corresponding plans will have to be primarily oriented, and from which capability requirements can be derived. Is it predominantly crisis management in the European periphery, protection against Islamist terrorism, or defense against disinformation and cyberattacks? A critical review of the many projects contained in the draft should build on this step. Focusing on core strategic projects would enhance the EU's credibility in international security.
- “[address] the elephant in the room more clearly,” namely EU members' views on and expectations for the US' security role in Europe. It is irritating that the draft SC assumes Sino-American systemic rivalry as the determinant of its own security policy, but it treats the US role in a rather dilatory manner thereafter. Do EU members expect the level of US security engagement in Europe to continue to decline, especially after the next US presidential election in late 2024, or do they expect continuity in US policy toward Europe? A lot should follow from this for the EU.
- specify to its EU partners what the succinctly formulated but far-reaching level of ambition in its coalition agreement regarding European integration (“further development [of the EU] into a federal European state”) means for the areas of security and defense. Is it possible and desirable for Germany to take further steps toward deeper integration here, despite the fact that a European army is not addressed in the coalition agreement? Berlin should also take the opportunity to politically flank the SC and outline the finality of this EU policy field.

- finally, the German government should present an implementation document on the German conclusions from the Strategic Compass in early summer 2022. In this way, it could demonstrate to the outside world its seriousness about drawing conclusions for its own security policy planning in the interests of the EU, and, domestically, its determination to give the SC a truly strategic character for German policy.

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SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und
Politik
German Institute for
International and
Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3 – 4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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*Dr. habil. Markus Kaim is a Senior Fellow in the International Security Research Division.
Dr. Ronja Kempin is a Senior Fellow in the EU //Europe Research Division.*