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The EU Strategic Compass: A Blueprint for a European *Defensive* and *Securitisation* Policy

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On 21 March 2022, the Council of the European Union released the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence.[1] The document provides a thorough assessment of international affairs and is meant to guide the development of the EU security and defence agenda for the next decade. The Strategic Compass has been hailed as a framework for coherence and convergence of the Union's foreign policy[2] but has also been criticised for its lack of concrete goals, for being a "wind chime" rather than a "compass".[3] Here the focus is on the apparent change of direction in EU foreign policy – at least when compared to the direction taken in the Global Strategy (2016) and the Integrated Approach to Conflicts and Crises (2018).[4] While these documents have their own specific logic and focus, comparing them is useful to understand where the Compass is guiding Europeans to.

[1]   European Union External Action (EEAS) website: *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/106337.

[2]   Simon Sweeney and Neil Winn, "Understanding the Ambition in the EU's Strategic Compass: A Case for Optimism at Last?", in *Defence Studies*, 17 February 2022, DOI: 10.1080/14702436.2022.2036608.

[3]   Markus Kaim and Ronja Kempin. "Compass or Wind Chime? An Analysis of the Draft 'Strategic Compass' of the EU", in *SWP Comments*, No. 3/2022 (January 2022), https://doi.org/10.18449/2022C03.

[4]   EEAS, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*, June 2016, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/17304; Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on the Integrated Approach to External Conflicts and Crises*, 22 January 2018, https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-5413-2018-INIT/en/pdf.

Recently, scholars have interpreted the Integrated Approach as being "multi-layered" in nature.[5] This refers to two parallel developments in the approach to manage conflicts and crises. First, the EU is willing to partner with multiple actors operating at different levels of governance, including international, regional and local actors, to address conflicts and crises. Second, the EU is willing to intervene over prolonged periods of time to manage all dimensions of the conflict cycle, from conflict prevention to peace consolidation. This multi-layered approach of "partnering" with many actors and "sustaining" action across time originates from the need to learn from the little success of top-down and short-term actions in conflict areas that have dominated the intervention landscape since the end of the Cold War.[6]

However, the Strategic Compass seems to be moving away from this multi-layered interpretation. "Multi-layeredness" refers neither to cooperation with different partners nor to lengthening the duration of interventions but merely to define the nature of security "threats" in a volatile environment. The Strategic Compass even seems to point towards an opposite direction.

While the Integrated Approach focused on the need to act "throughout all phases of the conflict" and contribute to "long-term sustainable peace and development", the Strategic Compass urges to act "promptly" and emphasises "rapidity, robustness and flexibility", specifically adding: "with partners if possible and alone when necessary". It is indicative that a hallmark of the Compass is the development of an EU Rapid Deployment Capacity to "swiftly deploy" a modular force of up to 5,000 troops.

Compared with the Integrated Approach, the Strategic Compass is wary that cooperation needs to be strategic, that is, only when it is appropriate to protect European interests. Cooperation, as High Representative and Vice President of the Commission, Josep Borrell, argues, needs to be accompanied by force: "if you

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[5] Dylan Macchiarini Crosson et al., "Multi-Layered Actions? Sustaining Partnerships in the EU Integrated Approach to Conflicts and Crises", in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 9 (December 2021), https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=835.

[6] Ana E. Juncos and Jonathan Joseph, "Resilient Peace: Exploring the Theory and Practice of Resilience in Peacebuilding Interventions", in *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (2020), p. 289-302, https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2020.1745445.

want dialogue, diplomacy and multilateralism to succeed, you need to put power behind it".[7]

In the EU's conceptual elaboration of its crisis and conflict management approach, the relationship with external partners has thus evolved significantly. In the Global Strategy, the "security" of the EU depended on engaging with others abroad: "our security at home depends on peace beyond our borders".[8] Thus, a central concern was to foster the resilience of states and societies to the East and South of the EU as a means to achieve greater interconnectedness, prosperity and security. "Resilience [...] benefits us and countries in our surrounding regions, sowing the seeds for sustainable growth and vibrant societies. Together with its partners, the EU will therefore promote resilience in its surrounding regions".[9]

Quite differently, in the Strategic Compass security depends on being protected from "external threats that affect our internal security".[10] More significantly, resilience only refers to "our" resilience, the resilience of member states, which needs to be bolstered to respond to diverse crises and threats. Concepts such as "multilateral governance" or "global governance" are nowhere to be found in the text. It seems as if the EU is retreating from shared responsibilities and collective action with external players, while giving priority to European security interests. In the Strategic Compass, security basically boils down to the protection from external threats rather than the advancement of a global agenda for cooperation. Unsurprisingly, the agenda "securitises" every issue in international relations: everything – not only Russia or organised criminal groups, but also migration, climate change and Covid-19 – is framed as a threat (and even a threat-multiplier) to be tackled with emergency measures.[11]

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[7] Council of the European Union, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, 21 March 2022, p. 6, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/410976.

[8] EEAS, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe*, cit., p. 7.

[9] Ibid., p. 23.

[10] Council of the European Union, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, cit., p. 15.

[11] Valeria Bello, "The Spiralling of the Securitisation of Migration in the EU: From the Management of a 'Crisis' to a Governance of Human Mobility?", in *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 6 (2022), p. 1327-1344, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1851464.

Some analysts see this change as necessary because the world has undeniably become more dangerous to the EU.[12] To be sure, Russia's foreign policy in its neighbourhood or in Libya and Syria[13] and China's ascendancy to "economic competitor and systemic rival" (as the Strategic Compass puts it) were critical issues well before the Strategic Compass was written. The Ukraine-Russia war has changed security perceptions for the future,[14] but what is important to see is that every crisis or new international affair is read today through a narrow and inward-looking security lens. "The world we face" is as dangerous as what the EU makes of it, as Alexander Wendt would have it. And the EU makes it dizzyingly threatening:

> Today, the EU is surrounded by instability and conflicts and faces a war on its borders. We are confronted with a dangerous mix of armed aggression, illegal annexation, fragile states, revisionist powers and authoritarian regimes. This environment is a breeding ground for multiple threats to European security from terrorism, violent extremism and organised crime to hybrid conflicts and cyberattacks, instrumentalisation of irregular migration, arms proliferation and the progressive weakening of the arms control architecture.[15]

This pragmatic and defensive shift may have already been developing in the past years.[16] Yet even if it is just a matter of greater emphasis on security and securitisation, the implications of this emphasis need to be discussed and actually questioned.

A defensive and emergency-driven posture may undermine the "multi-layered" dimension of EUFSP: it can put limits on partnerships and may be

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[12] Simon Sweeney and Neil Winn, "Understanding the Ambition in the EU's Strategic Compass", cit.

[13] Riccardo Alcaro, "Europe's Post-Cold War Order Is No More", in *JOINT Briefs*, No. 12 (February 2022), https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=927.

[14] Hylke Dijkstra, "The War in Ukraine and Studying the EU as a Security Actor", in *JOINT Briefs*, No. 15 (April 2022), https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=1024.

[15] Council of the European Union, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, cit., p. 18.

[16] Ana E. Juncos, "Resilience as the New EU Foreign Policy Paradigm: A Pragmatist Turn?", in *European Security*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2017), p. 1-18, https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2016.1247809; Pol Morillas, *Strategy-Making in the EU. From Foreign and Security Policy to External Action*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

counterproductive in terms of achieving long-term objectives. Civil society dialogues, cultural diplomacy, support for societal resilience and mediation, so crucial to manage conflicts and crises, may appear secondary to EUFSP, as these are usually not connected to the most immediate goal of defending 'securitised' issues (for instance, containing migration may appear more important than development or peacebuilding).[17] As Rieker and Riddervold note, when the EU perceives a situation as "urgent", challenging European security, the tendency is to implement policies that are "at odds with its own principles", thus losing its normative potential and becoming like any other actor.[18] This problem might worsen if a sense of urgency haunts all the EU security and defence agenda for the next decade.

[17]   Pol Bargués-Pedreny, "Resilience Is 'Always More' than Our Practices: Limits, Critiques, and Skepticism about International Intervention", in *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (2020), p. 263-286.

[18]   Pernille Rieker and Marianne Riddervold, "Not So Unique After All? Urgency and Norms in EU Foreign and Security Policy", in *Journal of European Integration*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (2022), p. 459-473, https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2021.1977293.

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