



Rising Risks: Protecting Europe with the Strategic Compass

By Daniel Fiott | 12 May 2022

Key Issues

- The EU's Strategic Compass has been delivered despite the war in Ukraine. It brings together different pieces of the EU's defence jigsaw puzzle into a coherent whole.
- Despite the ambition and comprehensiveness of the Compass, there is a need to use the period to 2030 to clarify two unresolved issues that relate to the defence of Europe.
- Further work is required by the EU to ensure a more serious approach to mutual assistance and a reinvigoration of military mobility. Both of these areas will significantly strengthen the EU-NATO partnership.

In the midst of Russia's war on Ukraine, the EU published its long-awaited security and defence strategy called the "Strategic Compass". The Compass is the first document of its kind for the EU, and it can be likened to what states normally refer to as a national defence strategy. In this respect, the Strategic Compass is the document to read if one wants to better understand the Union's priorities in security and defence and how it intends to secure its interests and values in the world. Unlike the EU Global Strategy, which only received a relatively passive welcome by the Council of the EU in 2016, the Strategic Compass has not only been adopted by foreign and defence ministers, but EU heads of state and government have endorsed the document. This is important as it shows how far security and defence has become a key issue for EU leaders.

Indeed, the tragic scenes emanating from Ukraine have only spurred on EU member states to find durable solutions to European security and defence. While no one can realistically expect a 46-page document to revolutionise EU defence policy overnight, it is instructive to see both the EU and NATO deliver tangible security and defence to its members, whether in the shape of boots on the ground or weapons shipments to the Ukrainian armed forces. In this respect, one should not neglect the fact that the Compass is not just a strategy document but also a roadmap for action – the Compass contains 72 specific action points, with the bulk needing action by 2025.

While the EU focuses on the war on Ukraine, the reflection period for EU security and defence is therefore momentarily suspended. Action is the watch

word. However, in working to deliver the Strategic Compass since the middle of 2020, the EU was only able to agree partial language and ambition in several areas which remain – and will only become more – fundamental for Europe’s defence. Accordingly, this policy brief focuses on two specific areas that will become increasingly important for the defence of Europe, especially as the war on Ukraine intensifies and the world becomes more tense for Europeans: 1) the necessity of developing the Union’s mutual assistance clause; and 2) the importance of reinvigorating military mobility.

Mutual assistance

Throughout the Strategic Compass there are 12 specific mentions to the Union’s mutual defence clause. This clause, which can be found at Article 42.7 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), specifies that an act of armed aggression on the territory of an EU member state would give other member states an obligation to provide aid and assistance by all the means in their power. In the present period, such a legal provision is vital given the level and severity of threats posed to EU member states by the Kremlin and President Putin. Indeed, Russia’s actions in Ukraine have only reinforced the idea that the EU needs to up its game in case any member state becomes a victim of armed aggression. It is for such reasons that the Compass calls for more live exercises that are geared to enhancing the EU’s response to armed aggression on the Union.

More specifically, the Compass tasks the EU with conducting regular cyber exercises in case of Article 42.7 contingencies and it also underlines the importance of the Union’s counter hybrid threat and cyber capacities. Rather innovatively, the Compass also directly refers to the need to be prepared for space-based attacks on EU space assets as part of the Union’s overall preparedness for mutual assistance. However, one does get the impression that the Compass approaches the issue of Article 42.7 TEU from the perspective of hybrid threats, cyber defence and space rather than a wider conceptualisation of how the EU would actually – if at all - respond should Russian tanks enter EU territory. This is perhaps to be expected given that the bulk of EU member states still view NATO’s Article 5 as the cornerstone of their collective defence. This

preference for Article 5 is understandable, of course.

Nevertheless, France’s invocation of Article 42.7 TEU in 2015 in reaction to the multiple terrorist attacks, including the one on the Bataclan, has given life to internal table-top exercises within the European External Action Service on potential EU responses. Such exercises have led to a heightened awareness among EU member states should any EU state invoke the treaty article. This is important given that the treaties see the mutual assistance clause as a tool where EU member states would assist each other bilaterally: the role of EU institutions in any response remains unclear. Despite this, table-top exercises will not be enough to ensure that the EU is well-prepared for any external act of armed aggression on the territory of the Union.

While NATO and Article 5 would realistically be the main security guarantee for many European states, this should not stop a serious development for EU responses in case of instances of armed aggression against the EU. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine that an EU/NATO member would not want to simultaneously invoke NATO’s Article 5 and the EU’s Article 42.7 in times of acute crisis – after all, even on the political level EU-NATO unity has become a key response to the Kremlin’s actions. Should Sweden and Finland join NATO in 2022, this would serve as even more reason for the EU and NATO to coordinate their mutual defence provisions. However, even for remaining EU neutral and/or non-NATO countries such as Austria, Cyprus, Ireland and Malta there is a strong interest in ensuring that Article 42.7 responses would be effective even without an available NATO response.

In this respect, the Union’s response to the war on Ukraine has been a good opportunity to think about the type of assistance that could be provided by EU member states in case of an armed attack on its territory. The European Peace Facility has certainly become a credible and important tool for financing the delivery of arms and ammunition. The Union’s willingness to deploy its rapid cyber response teams to Ukraine can also be seen as evidence of how the EU might respond should an attack on one of its member states take place. However, these responses might be too context-specific to the war on Ukraine and the EU needs a more coherent

plan of action for mutual assistance. Exercises will surely help, as the Compass states, but member states need to start thinking about wartime scenario planning and the inventories of supplies that would be required in any serious attack on the EU. What is more, there is no reason why the EU and NATO cannot have a mature dialogue on how both

of the dual-use nature of railways, ports and more. In the present time, however, both the EU and NATO need to reflect on the shape and extent of military mobility.

The Strategic Compass certainly recognises the need to take military mobility to the next level. Indeed,

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organisations would mutually respond in case a state invokes both Article 5 and Article 42.7. Such a situation would raise chain of command, financing and transportation considerations that are best resolved now rather than during a crisis.

Military mobility

The second aspect of European defence that needs to be highlighted in light of Russia's war on Ukraine is how fast and secure European and allied states can move military equipment around the continent. Clearly, the issue of military mobility has garnered greater political and financial support in the EU. It is also an integral part of EU-NATO cooperation and up to €1.5 billion is to be invested by the EU in dual-use transport infrastructure until 2027. Keep in mind that the United States, Canada and Norway are part of the Permanent Structured Cooperation project on military mobility - the first non-EU states to be part of an EU defence project, which further underlines the importance of military mobility.

However, the work on military mobility has so far revolved around a need to ensure more efficient cross-border customs procedures, investment in infrastructure and ensuring that military requirements are met (i.e., making sure that dozens of tanks be transported on civilian train tracks despite their weight and hazardous cargo). Additionally, the EU has felt comfortable in investing in military-relevant transport infrastructure because

by the end of 2022 the Compass indicates that the Union will revamp its work on military mobility but only in so far as it relates to the acceleration of transport projects, the further harmonisation of customs procedures, the cyber resilience of transport networks and further work on improving air and sea lift for large-scale troop and equipment movements. This is all essential, of course, but it perhaps fails to account for the major political and logistical challenges that have emerged on the back of Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine.

Indeed, military mobility was partially premised on the idea that the NATO Response Force would be a rotational force in Eastern alliance members, and that would in turn further necessitate faster and more reliable transport networks. While NATO has yet to decide on a shift in this premise, Russia's actions have already seen an increase in the number of NATO forces deployed to the alliance's eastern flank. The question, however, is would military mobility in its current state be fully effective in case NATO agrees to evolve its NATO Response Force "trip wire" force into a permanent presence in Eastern Europe. Countries directly bordering the crisis in Ukraine are already interested in such a permanent presence, and even the NATO Secretary General has spoken about these plans.

If this is the direction of travel for NATO in the coming months, the EU needs to be prepared to enhance its own vision for military mobility while also respecting

the constraints of neutral EU member states. Having a permanent presence close to Russia – notwithstanding the security concerns such a move may engender - means that the project will have to give due consideration for new tasks such as the protection of bases through missile defence and cyber resilience. While the protection of military bases may not sound very dual-use, the question to ask is whether the Union can be genuinely serious about protecting Europe without a plan for the future protection of military installations, wherever they may be stationed in Europe.

Investing in European defence infrastructure such as military bases could be the next pillar in strengthened EU-NATO cooperation. However, the EU can also make its own unique contribution in the coming months by investing more boldly in military capabilities that would protect Europe. Indeed, the beauty of tools such as Permanent Structured Cooperation and the European Defence Fund is that they can help develop military capabilities for the defence of Europe. New EU financial tools – which are being developed by the European Commission in the wake of the 2022 Versailles Summit following a tasking by the European Council – could see bold investments in missile and cyber defence, and this could lead to more significant investments in defence infrastructure in Europe.

Expect the expected

It goes without saying that the Compass cannot make a difference if it remains just a document. Strong and determined commitment by the EU member states is essential for success. This is easier said

than done, of course. In fact, there may be resistance to delivering on all aspects of the Compass by 2025, especially when European governments are focusing on the war on Ukraine. Yet, a “second wind” for NATO because of Russia’s actions should not lead to a lowering of the ambition in the EU. If anything, many of the Compass’ action points will make a significant contribution to the security and defence of EU/NATO states and partners. In particular, the role that could be played by the EU in developing cyberdefence and countering hybrid threats is extremely positive. From developing cyber deterrence, to lowering strategic dependencies and investing in military capabilities, the Compass certainly further develops how the EU must act to protect Europe and its citizens.

The important factor that should be kept in mind by European governments is that the strategic environment over the next decade is likely to lead to further surprises. Russia will continue to be a threat and China is a rising power. Yet, we do not yet know how the transatlantic relationship will evolve over the coming years. Any return to a Trumpian world view of the alliance, only reinforces the fact that Europeans have to become even more serious about their own defence. The EU should not shy away from questions of collective defence, even if it is the core task of NATO. The uncertainty stemming from future US elections, coupled with the multitude of security crises facing Europe, means that there is significant pressure on EU governments to deliver. The Strategic Compass shows them the way, but, as this policy brief has argued, there are important issues to pick up again soon.

