



# The War in Ukraine, the Strategic Compass, and the Debate Over EU Strategic Autonomy

By Robert G. Bell | 12 May 2022

## Key Issues

- Provoked by President Donald Trump's erratic and divisive stance on NATO, some in Europe called for an EU that was not dependent on the United States for the defence of Europe against the full range of possible threats. Others viewed such a level of ambition as illusory.
- Putin's launch of a war against Ukraine has dramatically unified and reinvigorated NATO under its U.S. leadership and re-emphasized the pre-eminence of its core task of collective defence.
- The EU's new Strategic Compass, quickly edited in its final drafting phase to take account of the war in Ukraine, recognizes the primacy of NATO's responsibilities in this regard and provides guidelines for EU defence enhancements in its own important defence and security programme that are in most respects complementary to NATO's efforts and activities.

## Introduction

An African-American proverb warns that; "if you don't know where you want to go, any road will take you there." The new EU Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, endorsed by the European Council on 25 March, is intended to avoid such ambivalence. As stated by the EU's High Representative/ Vice President (HR/VP) Josep Borrell in his foreword to this document, "the purpose of the Strategic Compass is to guide the necessary development of the EU security and defence agenda for the next ten years."

When the Strategic Compass initiative was launched in mid-2020, Europe was engaged in an often- fractious debate over the definition of what France originally termed "strategic autonomy." Central to this debate were fundamental questions as

to the degree of geostrategic independence Europe should seek vis-à-vis the United States (and by extension NATO) and the practicality that level of ambition would entail in terms of needing to substantially augment its own defence capabilities. Provoked by President Donald Trump's divisive decisions and pronouncements related to the strength, or lack thereof, of the U.S.' commitment to NATO, some in Europe called for an EU capable of independently defending Europe against the full range of possible threats. This included envisioning the deployment of forces capable of "[operations across the whole spectrum of crises](#) (low and high intensity) ", and not just peacekeeping interventions and training missions.

Reflecting on "developments of the past year", Chancellor Angela Merkel in 2018 advised

the European Parliament that “only a stronger Europe is going to defend Europe.” What was required, she argued, was “[that we have to work on a vision of one day creating a real, true European army.](#)” A year later, in a much-noted interview with the Economist, President Emmanuel Macron pronounced NATO “brain dead” and warned that “we need to re-evaluate the reality of NATO in terms of the commitment of the United States of America.” Macron called for “the Europe of Defense – a Europe which must acquire strategic autonomy and a military capability. The French President also called for a strategic dialogue on “the role played by France’s nuclear deterrent in [Europe’s] collective security” and later [invited](#) interested European partners to join in exercises of France’s nuclear-armed *force de frappe*.

Others were openly skeptical. Trump’s ambassador to NATO Kay Bailey Hutchinson emphasized in a 2018 press briefing that, “We want to assure ... that any EU effort would be complementary to NATO and for a NATO purpose, because we are the common defense umbrella for Europe and the United States and Canada.” In 2020, the Defence Minister of Germany Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer warned that “illusions of European strategic autonomy must come to an end.” In her view, “Europeans will not be able to replace America’s crucial role as a security provider.” Calling that a “misinterpretation” of historical dimensions, Macron publicly declared his “profound” disagreement.

### Reinterpreting “Strategic Autonomy”

Others tried to bridge these disagreements by re-defining the term, preferring the formulation “strategic sovereignty.” For his part, Borrell argued in 2020 that “autonomy should not imply total independence” and insisted that it could co-exist within the NATO framework. His definition divorced “strategic autonomy” from any capability-based end state, [describing](#) it as the “ability to think for oneself and to act according to one’s own values and interests.” Pundits noted, though, that during the Peloponnesian War, the Melians had chosen to respond to a dire threat by Athens by thinking for themselves and acting consistent with their values, but still saw their island state invaded and totally subjugated.

Many academics also stepped forward to try to finesse the issue. Sven Biscop argued for a division of labour, with NATO still in the lead for collective defence and Europe in a much-expanded supporting role but still executing other valuable expeditionary missions. He maintained that EU strategic autonomy “in other words will not extend to planning for territorial defense.” Nathalie Tocci argued that multilateralism was fundamental to the EU’s conception of security and defence and insisted that “an autonomous EU is able to live by its laws and norms, both by protecting these internally and by partnering multilaterally in an international order based upon the rules it has contributed to shaping.” Bruno Dupré agreed, maintaining that “strategic autonomy is not synonymous with independence or autarky but rather with interdependence that is chosen rather than suffered.” Daniel Fiott insisted that the fact that the EU had been successful over the past twenty years in carrying out over 30 civilian and military missions in areas including the Horn of Africa, the Western Balkans, Iraq, Georgia and Ukraine “[has proven it can act alone if necessary](#)” in certain cases, which can itself be construed as a measure of strategic autonomy.

### Implications of Putin’s War Against Ukraine

Vladimir Putin’s initiation on 24 February of his unprovoked and brutal war against Ukraine was taken just as the drafting of the Strategic Compass was in its final phases. This necessitated a flurry of last-minute additions and revisions, adding by one count at least fifteen references to Russia. In Borrell’s estimation, the invasion “made it even clearer that we live in a world shaped by raw power politics.” Borrell emphasized that the Strategic Compass must, therefore, ensure that the EU’s “geopolitical awakening” on this score must be translated into “a more permanent strategic posture.”

Where, then, does this important blueprint come out with regards to “strategic autonomy”? The answer is that it seems to borrow something from all points of view noted above. In its conclusion, the Strategic Compass boldly asserts that the new roadmap will “enhance the EU’s strategic autonomy.” This could be read as suggesting that the EU has already achieved such a status, but that more is required. In his preface, though, Borrell makes clear that in addition

to highlighting the “important role” the EU plays in security and defence, Russia’s war of aggression underscores “how essential NATO is for the collective defence of its members.” Indeed, the Strategic Compass specifically acknowledges in more than one passage the “specific character of the security and defence policy of certain Member States.” This

territory. Here, the emphasis is on non-combatant evacuation scenarios, such as occurred at Kabul in 2021, or a force interposition mission in a non-permissive environment.

With regard to defence industry policy, the Strategic Compass emphasizes that all EU defence initiatives

## **“The EU’s strategic interest in “doing more” on security and defence is both valid and overdue.”**

phrasing constitutes an indirect reference to Art. 42.7 of the EU’s Lisbon Treaty, which states that while all EU Member States have an “obligation of aid and assistance” in the event another Member State should be attacked, “Commitments and cooperation in this area shall be consistent with commitments under the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, which, for those States which are members of it, remains the foundation of their collective defence and the forum for its implementation.”

As both a practical and a treaty-based legal reality, this means that the Strategic Compass formally re-confirms that for the vast majority of the EU’s Member States (21 of 27), NATO still has primacy in providing for the territorial defence of Europe. If the current crisis in Ukraine should result, as is increasingly looking likely, in Finland and Sweden joining NATO, that ratio will increase to 23 of 27, leaving only the four much smaller and less militarily-capable EU nations of Austria, Cyprus, Ireland, and Malta outside the guaranteed protection of NATO’s Article 5.

The Strategic Compass presents a variety of terms to describe where it wants the EU to go next. In different passages, it calls, respectively but without elaboration, for a “step change,” a “sea change,” and a “quantum leap” in self-sufficiency. In terms of concrete actions, though, its main recommendation is the creation of the “capacity” to generate a 5,000-man “intervention force” that could be useful in certain contingencies in North Africa, the Middle East or other regions beyond the boundaries of EU

and capability planning and development tools will “remain coherent with those of the respective NATO processes.” Put differently, the EU’s capability development goals should be complementary to those of NATO, rather than duplicative. This, the document argues, “will enhance the readiness, robustness and interoperability of our single set of forces.” Finally, rather than espousing full self-sufficiency with regard to the EU’s resilience and security of supply, the Strategic Compass calls for “co-operating with like-minded partners around the world, on a reciprocal basis” to reduce strategic dependencies and increase mutual benefits. This presumably includes cooperating with the United States, UK, Canada, and other non-EU states.

Several other passages, though, point to trying to achieve a more protected and hence exclusionary defence industrial base in Europe. The Strategic Compass vows to “further boost cooperation and capabilities so that defence industrial cooperation within the EU becomes the norm.” According to European Defence Agency statistics, only 11% of defence equipment procurements among EU Member States in 2020 reflected collaboration with other Member States. The roadmap also sets out as a critical goal “achieving technological sovereignty in some critical technology areas, mitigating strategic dependencies in others, and reducing the vulnerability of our value chains,” including by “preserving intellectual property within the EU.” Finally, it commits to making “better use of collaborative capability development and pooling endeavours,

including by exploring task specialisation between Member States.”

Towards this end, particular emphasis is placed on several promising flagship initiatives within the EU’s programme of security and defence enhancements. This includes “more binding commitments” among Member States participating in Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), “significantly enhancing and harnessing” such EU funding mechanisms as the European Defence Fund (EDF), and full implementation of the recommendations in the 2020 Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) report related to enhanced defence cooperation among Member States in six agreed capability-focussed areas.

## Conclusions

The war in Ukraine has mixed implications for these endeavours. On the one hand, European nations have responded with pledges to significantly increase defence spending, with Germany alone promising a doubling of its defence budget. A rising tide lifts all ships and PESCO and the EDF can only profit from these enhanced resources. The war has also concentrated the European publics’ attention on the necessity for defence capabilities of high-intensity conventional warfare, and not just peacekeeping or maritime patrol missions. This kind of “geopolitical awakening” should help EU leaders deflect what had been a building crisis for European defence firms: the possibility that they would be “blacklisted” from bank loans or private equity investments as a result of the ever-more powerful Environment, Social and Governance sustainable finance movement.

That said, the new level of concern about Russia’s aggressive actions and threats of a broader regional nature has also led states throughout the EU and NATO to take procurement decisions in favour of immediately available U.S. high-end weapons systems that seemed unimaginable only two months ago. Finland and Canada have each now chosen the fifth-generation F-35 as their principal fighter aircraft for the coming decades, and Germany has chosen this fighter to replace its aging Tornado fighter bombers in NATO’s Dual Capable Aircraft nuclear-delivery role. These three allies now join the UK, Italy,

Belgium, Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Turkey, Greece, Poland and even Switzerland in buying, or proposing to buy, this stealthy American fighter for deterrence and defence operations in Europe.

In addition, the urgent need by Ukraine to obtain Soviet legacy weapons which its military can quickly press into service has resulted in a two-step process by which eastern European allies transfer armoured systems, missile defence batteries, aircraft, etc., to Ukraine and are in turn “backfilled” by the United States with equivalent (or in many cases superior) American capabilities. These backfills are in the form either of U.S.-manned deployments or bilateral sales to the host nation at bargain prices through the Pentagon’s \$300M+ European Recapitalisation Incentive Program (ERIP). As Daniel Fiott noted before the current crisis erupted, “ERIP is designed to wean Europeans off Soviet legacy systems but it is also a subsidy to US industry.” The result of all these trends makes it hard to believe that Europe will significantly alter the current ratios within, what it has long hoped would be, a genuine two-way street in transatlantic defence procurement, an imbalance that overwhelmingly favours the United States.

Last, but certainly not least, the war in Ukraine, together with the leadership President Biden has demonstrated in responding to it, has dramatically unified and reinvigorated NATO. To the extent that “strategic autonomy” in its more ambitious conception was embraced in many quarters in Europe, a major explanation was dismay over Trump’s statements and decision-making on fundamental matters related to European security. There is no guarantee Trump will not again become the US President. But neither is there any guarantee that Putin will for the foreseeable future exit the scene. With its attention now focused like a laser beam on its core task of collective defence, strengthening NATO becomes Europe’s foremost priority. The EU’s strategic interest in “doing more” on security and defence is both valid and overdue. With the re-election in France of President Macron to a second five-year term, this can be expected to remain a top priority of the EU – a theme he re-emphasized in his May 7th Inaugural Address. It will, however, likely continue to be couched in terms of its complementarity with NATO, rather than as an alternative paradigm.



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