

# The Rewriting of the EU's Military Strategy

WRITTEN BY RUMI SALIJA

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EU countries are bundling their defence forces in a new strategy. Negotiations for these plans began as early as 2020, and they have been tightened up considerably in recent months. This is mainly due to the war in Ukraine. The Strategic Compass now contains 'tougher language' against Russia (Barigazzi, Gijs & Lau, 2022). The 47-page final result is inevitably heavily influenced by the recent Russian military invasion of Ukraine and its profound impact on the European security architecture. On 21 March 2022, EU Foreign Affairs and Defence Ministers formally adopted the new Strategic Compass in Brussels. As they themselves say, this is "a new EU strategy document that sets out in ambitious terms the direction of European security and defence policy for the next 5 to 10 years" (COE, 2022a, p. 6). This analysis aims to briefly describe the novelty of this initiative, outline its spirit, and identify future challenges.

### **"The European Union has to learn to use the language of power"**

Josep Borell, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, encapsulates with this sentence what the Strategic Compass, which has been worked on for two years, embodies.

In June 2020, the European Council gave a mandate to draw up a European defence strategy, and in the first half of 2021, the defence ministers of the Member States further developed the strategy. Negotiations in the Council followed in early 2022 and the Strategic Compass was adopted in March 2022 under the French EU Presidency. Before it was adopted, however, this language of power intended by Josep Borell "hardened", as the first draft met with criticism that Russia's threat did not include specifics, such as military threats, weaponising energy supply, and hybrid attacks (Brzozowski, 2022a). "The war against Ukraine proves that Europe is even more in danger than we thought just a few months ago, when the first draft of this Strategic Compass was presented," Josep Borell admitted in his foreword on the Strategic Compass (EEAS, 2022). The Russian invasion of Ukraine has thus led to a major rewrite of the EU's forthcoming military strategy document, with the security threat of Moscow's aggression becoming the driving force behind the latest version of the document (Brzozowski, 2022a). Among the most important changes in the EU's military strategy proposal is the stronger support for eastern partners. If the EU wants to become a geopolitical heavyweight, it should, according to some Eastern European Member States, play a security role not only in Africa, but even more so in its Eastern neighbourhood (Brzozowski, 2022b).

It should be recalled that the commitments made in the Strategic Compass are long-term in nature and do not only relate to the war in Ukraine. The latter did, however, cause the language in the document to be changed, emphasising the fact that the European Union is “more united than ever”. “We are committed to defend the European security order,” the document states (COE, 2022a, p.2). Specifically, it now also refers to “core principles on which European security is built, enshrined in the UN Charter and the founding documents of the OSCE, including the Helsinki Final Act and the Charter of Paris” (COE, 2022a, p. 8). Through its unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against Ukraine, Russia has challenged these legal documents, which focus on the territorial integrity of states and borders, the renunciation of the threat or use of force, and the freedom of states to choose or change their security arrangements (Brzozowski, 2022a; COE, 2022a, p. 7; EEAS, 2022). These principles are not negotiable, nor are they subject to review or reinterpretation (COE, 2022a, p.8). The focus of change is thus now on strengthening ‘unity’ and ‘solidarity’ in the EU's relations with partners and like-minded countries in the G7, NATO and the UN (ibid.). Solidarity between Member States is indeed already reflected in Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union.

On defence spending, the new document states that “it becomes urgent to spend more and better” in coordination between Member States and the EU level (COE, 2022a, p. 30). For a long time, defence was not on the priority list of most European governments. But that has now definitely changed. The Russian threat has forced (almost) all the European states to increase their military budgets and strengthen their commitment to NATO (Tidey, 2022). Moreover, under the new plans the EU will make use of an extra-budgetary financial instrument “European Peace Facility” (EPF) with a ceiling of EUR 5 billion, which can be used to provide military support (Brzozowski, 2022a; Brzozowski & Almeida, 2022).

### **The Strategic Compass: “A guide for action”**

“The threats are rising and the cost of inaction is clear. The Strategic Compass is a guide for action,” said EU Chief Diplomat Josep Borrell (COE, 2022b). The Compass provides a common vision and direction for the EU's security and defence. The main priority of the Compass is the self-reliance of the European Union. In this regard, it proposes four lines of action (COE, 2022a, p. 3-4). Firstly, faster and more decisive action when a crisis breaks out. Second, to protect EU citizens by anticipating new threats and securing access to strategic domains. Third, investing together and developing advanced military capabilities to reduce dependence. And the fourth pillar is to work together against common threats, through stronger partnerships with NATO, the UN and like-minded partners. The Strategic Compass also includes a concrete plan to create a group of five thousand rapidly deployable European military personnel, the so-called ‘Rapid Deployment Capacity’, which should be operational by 2025 (COE, 2022a, p. 14). It is important to mention here that this is not the so-called flash force, which was recently deployed to protect the eastern NATO member states that feel threatened by Russia (RTL Nieuws, 2022). That flash force is part of NATO, not the EU.

## **A prelude to a European army?**

EU takes big step towards more military cooperation with the Strategic Compass. The cooperation goes a lot further than it does now. The question of whether there is a prelude to a European army was denied by Josep Borell (DeMorgen, 2022). Despite the tendency towards more cooperation and more investments – which would indicate a first step towards a European army – Dick Zandee, Senior Research Fellow at the Clingendael Institute, also states that this is certainly not the case because the cultural differences and the possible communication problems are too big for a real European army (RTL Nieuws, 2022). MEP Hilde Vautmans, coordinator of foreign affairs for the fraction Renewed Europe in the European Parliament, on the other hand pleads for progress in the direction of a European army based on a common foreign policy. According to her, the EU countries should get rid of that idea that the US will keep them safe through NATO (Vautmans, 2022).

To sum up, whether we like it or not, the security of the EU is at stake. From the Sahel to eastern neighbours and beyond, the geopolitical landscape around the EU is increasingly contested and unstable. The nature of these threats is also changing: hybrid threats, disinformation and cyber-attacks are new destabilisation tools. And since these threats will not disappear any time soon, we need to be well prepared to deal with them. And that is what the Strategic Compass is for. We are learning that there will be more European resilience, less dependence on the United States and a team of 5,000 soldiers that can be deployed in a short time. A stronger EU in security and defence will also contribute to stronger global and transatlantic security. It is thus time for the Europe of NATO and the EU countries not to be a plaything but a major security player in this new global constellation.

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