

Joint Communication Towards a New EU Defence Plan

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Background

On 18 May 2022, the European Union (EU) Commission and the High Representative adopted a joint Communication on EU defence gaps and proposed several measures to strengthen EU defence industrial and technological sectors.

The joint Communication responds to the EU Council's requests during Versailles Summit held on 10 and 11 March and lays the foundation for a way forward in the EU's defence sector. In the light of the Russian military aggression against Ukraine, the EU Council made some requests to respond to the situation in Ukraine in several sectors such as defence, energy, economy, and investment. In particular, the EU Council appealed to the Commission for building strong common EU defence capabilities in a joint effort with the European Defence Agency. Therefore, the EU Council asked to analyse the defence investment gaps in all the domains, adopt the necessary measures to fill these gaps, and strengthen the European defence industrial and technological base accordingly. (European Union Council, 2022)

This Communication has been presented two months later the Summit and the adoption of the Strategic Compass, on 21 March. It highlights the necessity of a joint effort to build a solid European defence through the joint acquisition of military equipment, the establishment of a common strategic defence programming, the strengthening of the European industrial base and R&D framework, and the European Defence Fund (EDF). (European Commission, 2022)

In addition, the agreed measures will also help reinforce the EU Member States' commitment to NATO, which remains "the foundation of the collective defence for its members". (European Union Council, 2022)

This analysis and the proposed measures reiterate the willingness of European Member States to reinforce the EU's security and defence already expressed within the Strategic Compass, a plan to strengthen the common security and defence policy by 2030. (European Union External Action, 2022)

This IF aims to summarise the EU Commission's analysis of the EU defence gaps and the potential measures to fill these vulnerabilities, especially in the land domain.

The first section is dedicated to the establishment of the Defence Plan.

The second section will examine the content of the EU Commission's analysis. A special focus is reserved for the land domain case and the effects of this Plan.

The conclusion will analyse the potential and limits of this initiative.

The Establishment of the New Defence Plan

In 2016, the European Union decided to enhance the European policy towards an independent structure on defence, through the EU Global Strategy. Consequently, different plans and mechanisms have been established, to assess and improve European Defence capacities, which have been reiterated in the EU Defence Plan to reinforce the need to use them. Indeed, the Strategic Compass has been established to enhance European Defence Cooperation by identifying clear goals and acting more quickly and decisively when facing crises.

The goals developed were informed by the Capability Defence Plan (CDP) and the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD). The CARD represents the most comprehensive source of information on defence investment at the EU level. The annual reports are aimed to provide a picture of the existing defence capability landscape in Europe and identify potential cooperation areas. The defence investments gaps correspond to “the difference between a stated national priority and the level of investment effectively committed to that priority”, (European Commission, 2022) and on a political and strategic level, to “the shortfalls inherited from past cuts in defence investments, and second to the present return of war in Europe”. (High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2022) They identify the main gaps that need to be addressed. Thus, with the current war on the European territory, the European Union stressed the need to speed up the European Defence to strengthen which the New Defence Plan did by bringing solutions to these main gaps identified.

The EU Commission’s Plan: The State of the Analysis

The EU Commission, with the EDA’s collaboration, has observed three main gaps that need to be filled to create joint military equipment, strategic defence, and support European industrial basement, in particular:

- Defence expenditure: the defence investments have been insufficient. The Commission considers the investments that occurred in the period between 2006 and 2021 and underlines that despite the defence expenditure reached in some EU Member States 2% of the GDP in 2022, there was a low point in 2021 of just 11% of the investments done collaboratively. This level did not fulfil the 35% benchmark agreed upon within the EDA and PESCO frameworks and resulted in far below China, Russia, and US’s defence investments.

- Defence industrial gaps: The return of high-intensity conflicts and territorial threats demand conversion of the EU defence industrial sector to ensure the supply and expansion of joint manufacturing capabilities. Indeed, the Commission observes the EU industry is made of prime contractors, midcaps, and small and medium enterprises. Most industrial production is within national borders and satisfies the demand of the national market. Therefore, EU joint investments in sectors are low, and production in crucial sectors such as aerospace and missile defence tends to be fragmented.
- Capability gaps: The Strategic Compass aims to develop a full spectrum force, tangible, mobile, interoperable, advanced, energy-efficient, and resilient. Hence, the analysis highlights the EU defence sector shall be prepared, augment existing force capabilities, and reinforce and modernise existing capabilities. (European Commission, 2022)

Regarding the short, medium to longer-term interventions, the Commission's plan focuses on reinforcing the multilayer air and missile defence systems especially the most exposed ones to protect civilians and critical infrastructures. In addition, it is crucial to develop and make operative the medium-altitude eurodrones, parts of the PESCO and EDA projects. A special focus is on reinforcing force and power projection, anti-access denial and coastal defence capabilities within the maritime domain. In space, the EU should protect the infrastructure against threats, by reinforcing connectivity, surveillance, and protection systems.

Finally, the risk of high intensity, large-scale conflicts on the periphery of the Union or beyond, requires a cooperative approach toward innovation and Emerging and Disruptive Technologies EDT, including AI, big data, quantum technology, robotics, autonomous systems, new advanced materials, blockchain, hypersonic weapons systems and biotechnologies applied to human enhancement.

These issues affect all the defence domains, from the land to maritime, air and cyber ones. The identification of the main lines of action highlights the necessity of a joint defence framework, which will sustain the industrial base, joint procurement, defence investments, and boost the defence research sector. Indeed, the Plan establishes a Defence Joint Procurement Task Force to "work with the Member States to support the coordination of their very short-term procurement needs to face the new security situation". (European Commission, 2022)

In addition, a dedicated short-term instrument will help the EU Member States willing to pursue the joint procurement within the most urgent area. The instrument will be conditioned to the Member States meeting specific criteria and the Commission is ready to invest euro 500 million into this scheme over two years.

Finally, the Commission will propose a European Defence Investment Programme (EDIP) regulation to establish the conditions and criteria for Member States to form consortia – namely the European Defence Capability Consortium (EDCC) - to procure jointly. In addition, the Commission underlines the importance to act in synergy and cooperation with NATO in the defence sector. (European Commission, 2022)

The Land Domain

The EU land domain sector is historically the most fragmented and driven by national calculations. Indeed, among the most urgent gaps that EU industrial defence must fill jointly, land forces have a crucial focus within this plan.

According to the Commission's analysis, the first line of action that the EU should adopt to fill an urgent gap is replenishing stockpiles by improving the combat readiness of existing forces and capabilities. Indeed, as the Strategic Compass establishes, "the EU will develop a Rapid Deployment Capacity (EU RDC) consisting of up to 5000 troops". (Strategic Compass, 2022) The reason is reacting to conflicts and ensuring the availability of sufficient initial provisions and stockpiles of ammunition, and specific missiles. Initial supplies to improve the ability to sustain high-intensity combat operations and rapid joint procurement of initial provisions of force protection equipment adapted to the operational context will be provided. A special focus is dedicated to training, as it tends to be conducted on a national or bilateral basis and certifying forces and improving data collection means and info sharing. Coordination with NATO will be also important to avoid unnecessary duplications in carrying forward these activities.

A second issue that demands an immediate solution is substituting the existing soviet legacy system. Regarding strategic medium to long-term capabilities, which will have an impact in 10 years and beyond, the EU should improve Europe's defence capabilities against persistent threats and high-intensity warfare. In particular, it should expand and upgrade the existing inventory of Main Battle Tanks and Armoured Fighting Vehicles, including combat support such as anti-tank and artillery systems and precision strike and counter-artillery.

On the Combat Support side, the Artillery and counter Artillery is a priority for the number of Member States, but associated budgets remain limited. (European Commission, 2022) Finally, the last action the EU must adopt is to reinforce and modernise capabilities in a long-term way. In this respect, the focus areas related to the land domain are the Main Battle Tanks (MBTs): "combine mobility, firepower and protection and are the backbone of land operations". The EU should introduce more modern MBTs, "benefiting from R&T on hybrid power trains, 360 degrees enhanced shared situational awareness and active protection systems. Developing modular and open platforms that can be easily upgraded and reconfigured in light of technological evolutions will improve interoperability and logistical standardisation as well as security of supply". (European Union External Action, 2022)

An additional critical gap is the digitalisation of ground combat, manned/unmanned teaming in combined air support to the ground is influencing capability development across all domains. Hence, a structured joint and multinational approach will improve interoperability and standardisation amongst land forces and with civilian authorities. (European Commission, 2022)

Conclusion: Potential and Limits of the Defence Plan on Land Forces

The New Defence Plan presented by the European Commission is going to increase the cooperation of Military Forces between the Member States in the strategic programme, technological improvement, military funds, and equipment. It has precisely established the gaps and the goals of the European Military to face attacks as the current war on European territory. The plan will strengthen security and defence in Europe and the Transatlantic, by working complementary to NATO and enhancing cooperation with other regional partners such as the ASEAN and OSCE. On the Land Force, it addresses specific needs for EU defence, such as the reinforcement of Combat Support, and military capabilities. CARD allowed Ministries of Defence to have cross border data for Member States to engage in collaborative projects at the EU level. This will increase interoperability, rationalise sustainability, economies of scale and simplified deployability.

However, the question of how this plan would be implemented by each Member state remains. They need to increase the decision-making process, notably for the Rapid Deployment Capacity, by procuring all the strategic enablers for the Member States by 2025. (Scazzieri, 2022) Moreover, on Military capability development, priority areas need to embed EU initiatives in national defence planning to encourage the Member States to work together. Thus, the initiative presents a great opportunity to enhance and develop the defence and security at the EU level, if all the gaps and needs are addressed in each Member state.

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