

The EU's Strategic Compass and Its Four Baskets: Recommendations to Make the Most of It

Mölling, Christian (Ed.); Schütz, Torben (Ed.)

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Kurzbericht / abridged report

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Mölling, C., & Schütz, T. (Eds.). (2020). *The EU's Strategic Compass and Its Four Baskets: Recommendations to Make the Most of It* (DGAP Report, 13). Berlin: Forschungsinstitut der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik e.V.
<https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-71305-4>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC-ND Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell-Keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY-NC-ND Licence (Attribution-Non Commercial-NoDerivatives). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

The EU's Strategic Compass and Its Four Baskets

Recommendations to Make
the Most of It



Christian Mölling
Research Director



Torben Schütz
Research Fellow
for Armament Policy



THE WORKSHOP

On September 21, 2020, DGAP and the German Ministry of Defence hosted an expert workshop on the Strategic Compass and its four baskets. Participating think-tankers from across Europe were invited to provide input and discuss their ideas in four break-out sessions.

Three guiding questions structured the input and debate during the workshop and its break-out sessions:

- In your opinion, which concrete topics or issues should be addressed at the strategic level in the four thematic blocks?
- What critical points do you anticipate concerning diverging threat perceptions of the individual EU member states?
- In your view, what measures would be necessary for the Strategic Compass to generate real added value for an EU capable of action?

The editors and authors of this Workshop Report want to extend their sincere gratitude to their colleagues for their time and input during the workshop. The following tables show the working groups and the participants:

CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Name	Institution
Nicole Koenig	Jacques Delors Centre
Tobias Pietz	ZIF
Tania Latici	European Parliament Research Service
Marina Henke	Hertie School of Governance
Florence Schimmel	DGAP

RESILIENCE

Name	Institution
Jana Puglierin	ECFR
Barbara Kunz	IFSH
Justyna Gotkowska	OSW
Niklas Helwig	FIA
Daniel Göler	University of Passau
Sophia Becker	DGAP

CAPABILITY DEVELOPMENT

Name	Institution
Daniel Fiott	EU ISS
Jean-Pierre Maulny	IRIS
Sophia Besch	CER/Atlantic Council
Torben Schütz	DGAP

PARTNERSHIPS

Name	Institution
Alexander Mattelaer	VUB/IES & Egmont
Anna Wieslander	Atlantic Council
Christian Mölling	DGAP
Roderick Parkes	DGAP

Content

The Workshop	2
Introduction	4
Crisis Management Dr. Nicole Koenig	6
Resilience Dr. Jana Puglierin	8
Capability Development Dr. Daniel Fiott	10
Partnerships Prof. Alexander Mattelaer	12



Introduction

The “Strategic Compass” is one of the most discussed initiatives related to EU security and defense during Germany’s ongoing Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second half of 2020 and will continue to be in 2021. It serves three purposes: First, to formulate the first common threat analysis of the EU. Second, to agree on clear and achievable strategic objectives for the EU to strengthen the EU as an actor in security and defense. And third, to offer political guidance for future military planning processes. This report¹ outlines challenges, ideas, and recommendations for the Strategic Compass and its four baskets – crisis management, resilience, capability development, and partnerships.

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Even though each basket faces its challenges, as described by our colleagues below, some cross-cutting themes emerge that shape the requirements for the Strategic Compass as a whole:

Expanding Agenda: First, there is a sense of expansion that characterizes each basket. Whether it is the number of crises around Europe, the expanding definition and thus demands on resilience, a growing number of capabilities and domains to operate (in), or the quantity of partnerships, these developments not only increase the overall complexity of Europe’s security and defense policy but also require serious recalibration of European instruments and ambitions in this policy field.

Guidance: The expectation of guidance is the second common theme that emerges when discussing the Strategic Compass. Guidance here means that the Compass, in the end, should provide some sort of benchmark in some areas (capabilities, partnerships) and greater precision in functional or regional priorities for others (crisis management, resilience). Moreover, the Strategic Compass shall serve as a link between the four baskets and their aspects of security and defense policy, as the connections between them are

multifold and mutually influential when defining the EU’s ambitions.

Member States’ Buy-in: Lastly, the success of the Strategic Compass, as with every significant EU initiative, remains in the hands of the member states and whether they develop both practical and political ownership.² It will remain a task for all those in favor of the Strategic Compass to support it throughout the next two years (and beyond) to see it come together and provide more than just “another paper” in European security and defense policy.

The following recommendations emerged from the input provided by the authors of the report chapters on each basket, as well as debates among the workshop participants. Recommendations:

1. Convergence on a narrower set of key priorities is needed for quicker, more united, and more effective EU crisis response. The Strategic Compass thus needs to provide greater precision on the functional and regional priorities of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).
2. The correct sequencing of workshops during the strategic dialogue in 2021 could conduce the member states to first define a narrower set of priorities before embarking on the more technical adjustment of instruments and institutions.
3. Secure lasting impact of the Strategic Compass by highlighting work on subsequent documents like an updated Implementation Plan on Security and Defence and a new Headline Goal, as well as better instruments to ensure coherence and compliance.
4. The subsidiarity principle should be applied wherever appropriate. But comprehensive resilience can only be achieved through the interaction of different levels and actors: Between the EU institutions, the EU and its member states, the public and private sectors, civil and military actors, and the EU and NATO.
5. In capability development, it will be especially important to utilize the consensual nature of the CSDP to work closely with those EU member states that favor the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP). Nevertheless,

¹ On September 21, 2020, the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) and the German Ministry of Defence hosted an expert workshop. Participating think-tankers from across Europe were invited to provide input and discuss their ideas in four break-out sessions. The discussion marks the second event in a series of workshops that accompanies Germany’s presidency of the EU Council on its projects and goals in security and defense. The series aims to create a dialogue among experts from government and think-tank communities across Europe on topics such as the further development of EU defense initiatives, the Strategic Compass, and EU-NATO cooperation.

² See also C. Major and C. Mölling, “Europe, Germany and defense: priorities and challenges of the German EU presidency and the way ahead for European Defense,” Note n°63/20, Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique (October 2020), p. 10: <https://www.frstrategie.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/notes/2020/202063.pdf> (last accessed October 23, 2020).

greater linkages with national capability planning systems work both ways: The Strategic Compass needs to consider some system of accountability and timelines to ensure that member states adhere to the targets they set in the Council.

6. Initiate inquiry into possible ways to streamline and simplify the EU's capability prioritization process, as well as strengthening political structures and the integration of military expertise without treaty changes and/or disrupting the current institutional landscape.

7. Prioritize partnerships in the function of their value in accomplishing well-defined ends.

8. Operationalize the complementarity between the EU, NATO, and UN frameworks. Address and define the division of labor between partners, between EU members, within the EU as an organization, as well as between civilian and military tools for both resilience and crisis management.

Crisis Management

Dr. Nicole Koenig, Deputy Director,
Jacques Delors Centre

INTRODUCTION

Crisis management missions and operations are the most visible and tangible expression of the CSDP. The Global Strategy of 2016 set the political objectives: responding to external conflicts and crises, capacity building of partners, and protecting the Union and its citizens. Since 2016, various steps have been taken to refine EU crisis management tools and institutions. However, the central weakness of the Global Strategy is its vagueness. The EU does not have the resources to respond to all conflicts and crises globally and even in its periphery. If the Strategic Compass is to add value, the member states need to address this issue head-on: What should be the main purpose of the CSDP? A more detailed discussion on the modalities and tools can only be undertaken once this question is solved. A review of the division of labor between NATO, the UN, and a variety of EU institutions is in order. In addition, we need a sensible discussion of what type of means the EU needs to meet the “revised” CSDP goals and how compliance with them can be ensured.

FOCUS ON STRATEGIC GOALS AND PRIORITIES

The Strategic Compass should be used as an opportunity to forge a clearer understanding of the CSDP's overarching objectives for the next decade. This will require answering some fundamental questions: What should the balance between crisis management and protection/territorial defense be? If the CSDP's central purpose is crisis management, then what type of crises should the EU get involved in? Should it limit itself to stabilizing its immediate neighborhood? Or should the CSDP become a tool for global power projection? Alternatively, it could also become an instrument to protect the “European homeland” through, for example, border management, the fight against organized crime, and the protection of critical infrastructure.

In other words, the Strategic Compass needs to provide greater precision on the functional and regional priorities of the CSDP. Making these choices will no doubt be controversial due to the different strategic cultures and preferences. However, let's face it: Considering the member states' limited willingness to provide resources and personnel, the EU will not be able to equally address all items of a broad 360° threat analysis. Convergence on a narrower set of key priorities is needed for quicker, more united, and more effective EU crisis response.

REVIEW THE INTERNATIONAL AND INTERNAL DIVISION OF LABOR

Bringing together the crisis management and partnership baskets, the member states should reassess the current international division of labor: Where should the EU be able to intervene autonomously? How can we ensure better coordination between the EU, NATO, and UN in areas where mandates overlap? Such broader reflections should entail a review of cooperation modalities. For example: How can EU-NATO cooperation in hybrid crisis response be deepened despite the political obstacles? Can the outdated Berlin Plus mechanism be replaced by more flexible forms of cooperation? Should the EU provide modular crisis management packages to UN peace operations?

The Strategic Compass should also be used to review the EU's internal division of labor. While the EU's comparative advantage is said to be its ability to combine civilian and military tools, there is still too much stovepiping. The member states should raise the level of ambition of civil-military crisis management. Should the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) and Civilian Planning and Conduct Capability (CPCC) be merged into a real civil-military headquarters? What can the EU learn from the “One UN” approach to peacebuilding and peace operations? How could cooperation on the ground between EU missions, operations, and delegations be enhanced? What lessons can we draw from regional concepts as seen in the Sahel? How does the European Peace Facility fit in?

MATCH MEANS AND ENDS

Only after mapping threats and prioritizing ends, should the member states turn to adjusting the means. Therein, they should beware of mismatching threats and instruments. We have seen a growing tendency to use EU crisis management for migration management. While migration is certainly a

priority for many member states, missions and operations are not always the right tools. The Commission or the EU's border management agency Frontex might be better suited to the task. The case of Operation IRINI, where the muddling of migration and security objectives has delayed the launch of the operation and limited its effectiveness, should serve as a negative example.

The member states should establish a close link between the crisis management and capability baskets. The EU needs a different set of capabilities depending on whether it focuses on crisis management in the broader neighborhood or homeland protection. The Civilian CSDP Compact provides sensible goals that need to be implemented. An updated EU Headline Goal could concretize the EU's military level of ambition in terms of scale. Together with functional and regional priorities, embedded in illustrative scenarios, it should inform the selection of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and European Defence Fund (EDF) projects, as well as spending under the Military Mobility Framework.

Finally, the Strategic Compass should focus on implementation and compliance with joint targets. The member states should discuss the usability of the Battlegroups in light of strategic priorities and the international division of labor. More member states should join the PESCO project European Union Force (EUFOR) Crisis Response Operation Core for it to become a prime venue for implementation. To ensure compliance beyond single projects, the member states could also develop a peer review mechanism within PESCO³ with a specific crisis management arm. They could thus evaluate each other's performance on various dimensions while exchanging best practices and creating shared experiences.

CONCLUSION

There are two risks attached to the work in the crisis management basket. One is to get stuck in meta-debates, such as on strategic autonomy. The other is to get lost in micro-dossiers, such as refining concepts for EU training missions. For the work to add value, the member states need courage, the right process, and adequate follow-up. They need courage to address the controversial strategic questions and to prioritize. The right sequencing of workshops could conduce the member states to first define a narrower set of priorities before embarking on the more technical adjustment of instruments and institutions. Full engagement of the Commission in the process is necessary for an ambitious civil-military approach to both crisis management and

resilience. Whether or not the document will have a lasting effect depends on the follow-up, such as through an updated Implementation Plan on Security and Defence, a new Headline Goal, and better ways to ensure compliance.

³ T. Laćići, "No Pain, No Gain: Taking PESCO to the Gym," Security Policy Brief No. 129, Egmont Institute (September 2020), <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2020/08/spb129-tania-latici-final-3.pdf> (accessed October 20, 2020).

Resilience

**Dr. Jana Puglierin, Head of the Berlin Office,
European Council on Foreign Relations**

INTRODUCTION

“Resilience” has become one of the most widely used buzzwords of recent years. The concept has been embraced by a wide range of actors and in a multitude of contexts. In the European Union Global Strategy (EUGS) alone the terms “resilience” or “resilient” – understood as “the ability of states and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises”⁴ – appear more than 40 times. Building “state and societal resilience” to the EU’s East and South is identified as one of the five key priorities for the EU’s external action.

RESILIENCE AS A MOVING TARGET

However, resilience has become such a broad concept that the challenge in writing the Strategic Compass is to define clearly what is meant by the term in a security and defense framework. As the concept of security has expanded, so has the concept of resilience. Today, the lines between peace and war and between external and internal security are increasingly blurred. With the 9/11 terrorist attacks, first large-scale cyberattacks, targeted disinformation campaigns, but also global developments such as climate change, the understanding of resilience has constantly evolved. Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted additional vulnerabilities of modern Western societies, such as the security of supplies or the ability to deal with mass casualties.

Resilience is, therefore, not a static constitution that states and/or societies can achieve, but a dynamic concept that needs constant adaptation. The threat analysis on which the Strategic Compass is based can therefore only be of limited use in defining the resilience cluster. It is certainly not enough to understand resilience in narrow CSDP terms. The Compass will have to define resilience as a comprehensive approach that includes a wide range of military, political, societal, economic, and environmental dimensions. After all, it is important not only to increase resilience to

already known threats. Rather, resilience describes a basic constitution that must be achieved to deal with those threats that are not yet known to exist. Resilience aims to minimize the disruptive impact of any given event on the normal functioning of the EU, its member states, and European societies.

COMPREHENSIVENESS RECOMMENDED

We would recommend taking the examples of resilience-building in many of the Nordic and Baltic countries for further reflection on how to develop the resilience cluster. Those nations apply a comprehensive approach to security that incorporates a broad range of military and non-military aspects of national security and crisis management. “Comprehensive security” is seen as a result of the activities of many institutions and involves the state authorities and armed forces, as well as NGOs and local communities. The Strategic Compass should contribute to raising the civilian awareness of the multidimensional character of today’s security threats, through crucial energy or communication dependencies or foreign direct investment in critical European infrastructure, for example.

The Strategic Compass must have an intersectoral and interagency “whole of the EU approach,” linking the various instruments that the EU institutions and the member states need to manage in order to enhance the EU’s resilience. No member state in the EU can alone become sufficiently resilient to current threats. However, many of the measures that need to be taken to achieve greater resilience fall within national competence, and often within the private sector. The subsidiarity principle should be applied wherever appropriate. But resilience can only be achieved through the interaction of different levels and actors: between the EU institutions, the EU and its member states, the public and private sectors, civil and military actors, the EU and NATO. The aim of the Strategic Compass should be to bring the different pillars together and to give some guidance for fruitful cooperation.

EU SOLIDARITY

In the event of a crisis, the EU must be able to react quickly. In order to ensure this, implementation modalities for Article 42.7 TEU and Article 222 TFEU should be further operationalized in the Strategic Compass. The first application of the European assistance clause was marked neither by

⁴ European Commission, *European Union Global Strategy* (June 2016), p. 23: <https://eas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf> (accessed October 20, 2020).

a coherent strategy nor by a common planning approach. EU solidarity thus looked more like a loose-leaf compilation than a concerted effort. In order to apply the full potential of the European mutual assistance clause in the future, it makes sense to give the EU institutions a coordinating role while the member states continue to lead the efforts. What is more, the first invocation of Article 42.7 TEU brought only a handful of countries to significantly increase their engagement; most reactions involved rather small contributions and forms of support that may have occurred anyway. The Strategic Compass should therefore aim to make member states' solidarity measures more binding. Concerning the EU's possible role in territorial defense (following the activation of Article 42.7 TEU), the majority of the working group was in favor of excluding this issue from the further development of the resilience cluster and instead of prioritizing the European adaptation to US priorities within NATO.

Capability Development

Dr. Daniel Fiott, Security and Defence Editor,
European Union Institute for Security Studies⁵

INTRODUCTION

The Strategic Compass promises to give the EU greater clarity over the strategic direction of CSDP and, potentially, EU security and defense more broadly. Which direction is the EU headed? What do North, South, East, and West mean in the context of CSDP? Who is carrying the Compass, and who is joining the Union on the route? Can EU security and defense ever function as effectively and accurately as a compass? These are longstanding questions, of course, but the process the EU is about to embark on also calls for a debate about what the EU will pack in its backpacks (just a pickaxe, or is a proverbial Swiss Army Knife required for the journey?). An uncomfortable truth is that any discussion about capabilities under the Strategic Compass process will have to deal squarely with the unfulfilled promises of the past: that is, the Union's longstanding inability to fill capability shortfalls. After twenty years of CSDP, the gaps barely merit mentioning, although they serve as a painful reminder of failed commitments. While Europeans are starting to bring online air-to-air refueling and strategic airlift capabilities, the continent is still behind in areas such as intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), and it continues to struggle to generate the force packages required for missions and operations.

The Strategic Compass emerges at an important time for the EU, especially given the geopolitical challenges it currently faces. Yet, there is a risk that if there is insufficient and/or no sustained buy-in from member state governments, the Compass will only raise expectations further without making any real material difference. The Compass' third basket on capabilities therefore emerges as a crucial pillar of the whole exercise – without capacity, defense is simply built on stilts. Yet, before the EU identifies what capabilities it requires – through the other baskets – it needs to make sense of the geopolitical terrain facing the EU. The truth is that this is not your father's CSDP anymore, and

missions and operations have to keep abreast with technological and strategic/tactical shifts in conflict. The wider political context should be kept in mind too. The EU will need to grapple with the uncertain economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Union appears committed to achieving technological sovereignty all while Washington and Beijing battle for global supremacy.

With this context in mind, developing a capabilities basket under the Strategic Compass will require engagement with at least four major questions: 1) Should EU capability development cater only to the needs of CSDP, or is a wider concept of EU security and defense required?; 2) What is the correct balance between filling existing capability shortfalls and investing in future technologies, systems, and platforms?; 3) What capabilities should be prioritized to simultaneously respond to operational needs, industrial objectives, and increased technological sovereignty?; and 4) Is the current EU capability development process still fit for its purpose? Unavoidably, it will also be necessary to reflect on what is meant by “capability” today and what the expression “full spectrum” implies in the context of an increasingly contested operational landscape and the so-called digital revolution.

HOW AND WITH WHAT MEANS?

One of the important tasks facing the penholders of the Strategic Compass will be to ensure coherence between each of the four baskets: crisis management, resilience, capabilities, and partnerships. At this early stage, it already appears as though the two baskets on capabilities and partnerships could play a foundational role to the baskets on crisis management and resilience. This should in no way be interpreted as a secondary role for the capability and partnership baskets. Indeed, it is apparent that the crisis management and resilience baskets are about what the EU should do, whereas the capability and partnership baskets address how and with what means the EU should act.

Equally important will be how the discussions in the crisis management and resilience baskets set the parameters for capability development. For example, if under the resilience basket member states agree to include planning for Article 42.7 TEU and Article 222 TFEU contingencies, then this potentially pushes the Union into areas associated with collective defense, and this will have huge – and potentially unrealistic – implications for capability development. Given the political sensitivities that these types of discussions

⁵ The views in this contribution do not necessarily reflect the position of the EU Institute for Security Studies or the European Union.

provoke, it is perhaps to be expected that many member states will push to have the mutual assistance and solidarity clauses omitted from the resilience basket. One could, of course, call for their insertion in potential future iterations of the Strategic Compass and, what is more, not specifically including these treaty articles at this stage does not necessarily curtail a reflection about the capabilities that would be required for crisis management and maritime security, cyber defense, critical infrastructure protection, supply security, etc.

USING EU DEFENSE TOOLS

Bringing together these dimensions of security will not be easy from a capability development perspective, and any coherent strategy will also have to grapple with the challenge posed by emerging technologies. Clearly, close cooperation between the European Commission, the European External Action Service (EEAS), and the European Defence Agency (EDA) will be necessary if the EU is to capitalize on initiatives being developed by the Agency and under the European Defence Fund (EDF), Horizon, the industrial strategy, the space program, the Digital Single Market, etc. In 2021, the Commission has committed to drafting and publishing an Action Plan focusing on the linkages between civil, space, and defense industries. This work should be drawn on for the Strategic Compass, and greater attention could be paid to the issue of key technology dependences in the area of security and defense.

The capability basket could also contribute to ensuring greater coherence inside and across initiatives such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the EDF. The 47 ongoing PESCO projects could do with greater coherence, and it remains to be seen whether some projects will be grouped around a core project or jettisoned altogether. What is a positive development is that nine PESCO projects have already received financial support under the European Defence Industrial Development Programme (EDIDP). While respecting their specific legal bases, there is still room to ensure that PESCO and the EDF can create a positive dynamic for EU capability development. In this respect, the Strategic Compass could point the way on what ambitions the EU has in a specific operational domain. For example, a range of PESCO and EDF projects pertain to the maritime domain, but what is the EU's overarching ambition as a maritime actor in security and defense? Relatedly, the Compass should help the EU prioritize its maritime capabilities while also specifying how the Union can maintain and extend its operational and technological edge at sea. Other military

domains would benefit from the same exercise, and the ultimate goal should be to have greater clarity over the EU's military and industrial requirements.

COMMON CAPABILITY PLANNING

Another challenge facing the drafters of the Strategic Compass is coherence across the EU's existing capability development mechanisms: the Capability Development Plan (CDP), the High Impact Capability Goals (HICGs), the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), and the Headline Goal Process (HLGP). An obvious starting point is to ensure that existing mechanisms fit together in time for the next round of PESCO projects in 2021. However, a bolder approach could seek to streamline and simplify the EU's capability prioritization process. The question is how to achieve this without a treaty change and/or disrupting the current institutional landscape. Ultimately, the solution can only be political, and if the Strategic Compass is to provide the guiding hand or last word on capability prioritization at the EU level, then this process needs to be steered in a top-down fashion by the HR/VP.

However, any top-down decision-making needs to be balanced by the needs of EU member states. The Compass will ultimately fail if it does not strike roots in national defense planning. Fortunately, CARD and PESCO provide valuable conduits to national systems, but any capability priorities identified by the Strategic Compass have to be managed by defense planners who divide their time between national planning, NATO, the EU, and other capability initiatives. In this respect, it will be especially important to work with those EU member states that favor the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP). New ways of enhancing EU-NATO cooperation are required, although the autonomy and specific nature of each organization's capability development processes should be respected. Nevertheless, greater linkages with national capability planning systems works both ways: the Strategic Compass needs to consider some system of accountability and timelines to ensure that member states adhere to the targets they themselves set in the Council. Without such a system, the EU risks repeating the failures of the past – lots of concepts, little capability.

Partnerships

Prof. Alexander Mattelaer, Vice Dean Research of the Institute for European Studies at the Vrije Universiteit and Senior Research Fellow, Egmont Institute

INTRODUCTION

Ever since the inception of the Common Foreign and Security Policy, the notion of partnerships has been firmly embedded into the EU's strategic DNA. The relevant Maastricht Treaty provisions referenced not only the UN Charter and the Helsinki Final Act, but also the obligations relating to Europe's common defense organized under the North Atlantic Treaty. Promoting international cooperation, furthermore, was more than a mere means to an end: it constituted a foreign policy objective in its own right. As the EU is in the process of re-codifying its bearings via the Strategic Compass, it is worthwhile to evaluate what the original partnership agenda has delivered, by what issues it has been plagued, and what may be expected in terms of its future prospects.

A PROLIFERATION OF PARTNERSHIPS

Looking back on the past decades, the main observation pertaining to the EU's partnership agenda concerns the proliferation of partners and partnerships. Not only did the Union strike a multitude of bilateral strategic partnerships (with Brazil, Canada, China, India, Japan, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, South Korea, and the US), it also codified a range of partnerships with international organizations (with ASEAN, the AU, NATO, and the UN) and its very own Eastern Partnership (with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine). This remains a policy objective to the present day. In the words of the EU's High Representative, "we have to develop ... new partnerships and at the same time to increase our strategic autonomy."⁶ Nor has the EU been alone in pursuing ever-more partnerships, for that matter. Both NATO and the UN have pursued a wide range of partnerships of their own.

The net consequence of this proliferation of partnerships has been a gradual loss of visibility, recognizability, and rel-

evance of the individual partnerships. The growing number of partners has stretched both policy bandwidth and implementation capacity. In addition, even the most institutionalized and developed of partnerships – such as the EU-NATO relationship – have been plagued by persistent problems in terms of their substantive development.⁷ Finally, the partnership agenda has not been immune to the changing atmospherics of international relations. In particular, the EU's Eastern Partnership has been characterized by growing contestation by Russia – itself an erstwhile strategic partner of the EU. In sum, while the partnership agenda sought to cement international cooperation and consumed significant diplomatic resources, it has proved unable to prevent the erosion of international order witnessed in recent years.

THORNY ISSUES PLAGUING THE PARTNERSHIP AGENDA

At the conceptual level, the EU's partnership agenda has been characterized by profound ambiguity about the EU's own identity as an international actor. The EU has been traditionally conceived as a project for pacifying intra-European relations through economic interdependence – a characterization that most Europeans can readily agree on. Yet its foreign policy persona has been the subject of much contestation. Should the EU's foreign policy extend its internal logic of fostering a qualitative change in the conduct of international relations? Or should it accept the reality of international power politics and leverage the EU's clout at the service of hard-nosed interests? To a significant extent, this bipolarity is codified in the partnership agenda itself. Can the EU simultaneously team up with the UN in building a better world and with NATO in providing for European security – ultimately relying on the force of arms and the logic of deterrence?

The contestation of both the nature and the content of European foreign policy – by different member states and politico-ideological constituencies alike – is probably unavoidable. Yet as the definition of such a foreign policy remains characterized by the requirement for unanimity, it is also to be expected that the content thereof will be characterized by the lowest common denominator decision-making. Partnerships that are lofty on rhetoric but light on content are likely to be a prominent feature thereof. The fundamental challenge for the Strategic Compass will be to combine meaningful prioritization with policy substance that reconciles different stakeholders.

⁶ Josep Borrell, "The EU in the multilateral system," European Union External Action (September 19, 2020): <https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/85409/eu-multilateral-system_en> (accessed October 20, 2020).

⁷ See Gustav Lindstrom and Thierry Tardy, eds., *The EU and NATO: The essential partners* (Paris, 2019).

FUTURE OUTLOOK AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the identified problems, the Strategic Compass can successfully build on the wide network of partners that has been so painstakingly constructed. On the one hand, the prioritization of partnerships becomes easier to accomplish when partnerships are valued as means providing an important source of leverage in the pursuit of well-defined ends. The existing pool of partners can thus be organized along a spectrum spanning from close and value-based alliances to neutral and more transactional partners. On the other hand, the partnership agenda can be clarified by operationalizing complementarity between different organizations. For EU member states, policy coordination across different domains of power will come naturally, just as collective defense – relying on both nuclear and conventional deterrence – comes naturally to NATO allies. The UN continues to provide a forum for global dialogue and a framework for peacekeeping operations when the Security Council can issue well-defined mandates. In other words, these organizations have their own specificity that can serve as the basis for a clear demarcation of tasks. Irrespective of the institutional framework in which European cooperation may unfold, the most fundamental factor enabling the Strategic Compass to accomplish its objectives remains the commitment among European states to ensure and guarantee each other's security – that is to say, their collective security.

DGAP

Advancing foreign policy. Since 1955.

Rauchstraße 17/18
10787 Berlin

Tel. +49 30 254231-0

info@dgap.org

www.dgap.org

[@dgapev](#)

The German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) is committed to fostering impactful foreign and security policy on a German and European level that promotes democracy, peace, and the rule of law. It is nonpartisan and nonprofit. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP).

Publisher

Deutsche Gesellschaft für
Auswärtige Politik e.V.

ISSN 1866-9182

Editor Bernadette Geyer

Layout Luise Rombach

Design Concept WeDo

Photos

© DGAP



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution – NonCommercial – NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.