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Understanding the ambition in the EU's Strategic Compass: a case for optimism at last?

Simon Sweeney and Neil Winn

ABSTRACT

The quest for substance, capability, and strategic autonomy goes on – or does it? Is the objective of CSDP territorial defence and strategic autonomy, or crisis management and softer security concerns like peacekeeping, border management, protection of shipping lanes, and/or cyber security? The Union needs to move beyond familiar complaints about the lack of common strategic culture and EU intrusion into NATO responsibilities. Geostrategic and economic imperatives dictate that the EU should progress CSDP beyond civilian crisis management in the EU Neighbourhood, and military training and security sector reform (SSR). The Strategic Compass must signal CSDP clarity of objectives, coherence, enhanced capability, and appropriate burden sharing with NATO. The response to the Strategic Compass must build European strategic autonomy in ways that strengthen NATO. For military strategic and economic reasons, both the EU and the post-Brexit UK need intensive cooperation to maintain their geostrategic relevance and strengthen the NATO alliance. This paper reflects on prospects for the EU Strategic Compass and offers timely analysis of recent trends in EU foreign and security policy and expresses cautious optimism regarding the enhanced European strategic autonomy/actorness.

Introduction

This article analyses the EU Strategic Compass (SC), announced in late 2020 under the German Council Presidency, and intended for launch during the current French-led EU Council. The SC aims to set the course for EU security and defence ambition for the rest of this decade and beyond. This article begins with an overview of the background to the SC and sets out the minimum that it should achieve, before analysing this ambition in the light of what we argue should be the scope of the initiative. Finally, we refer to the wider context in relation to European strategic ambition and the EU-NATO relationship. This last section takes account of the position of the UK as Europe's foremost NATO member, now outside the EU. We conclude with cautious optimism that the SC process highlights the scope for effective burden-sharing with NATO, but we add that the Union should seek a security and defence rapprochement with the UK, sufficient to guarantee an integrated EU-UK strategic ambition involving all states willing and able to participate in measures that include capability integration,

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fully compatible with and within European NATO. Full UK engagement with the European Defence Technological Industrial Base (EDTIB) is a prerequisite for EU and UK relevance, both economic and strategic, in an unstable and highly competitive global context.

For almost three decades the EU has been analysed in respect of its "capability-expectations" gap where defence is concerned (Hill 1993). Five years later at Saint Malo the joint statement delivered by President Chirac and Prime Minister Blair promised EU

> capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces, the means to decide to use them and a readiness to do so, in order to respond to international crises (Saint Malo Declaration 1998).

Since Saint Malo, the EU has been promising "substance" in defence capabilities (Shepherd 2003). The European Security Strategy (ESS) (Solana 2003) aimed to achieve a common European strategic culture, something which remains at a distance, and is at best still "emergent" (Biava et al. 2011; FINABEL 2021). The EU Global Strategy (EUGS) was the boldest statement yet about EU ambition, this time expressed in the phrase "strategic autonomy" (EEAS 2016). David McAllister, Chair of the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, has called on the SC to prepare for EU "strategic sovereignty," a phrase which adds explanatory content to what strategic autonomy means, and implies that integration is essential to that end. But McAllister admits that member states lack a common strategic culture and have different threat perceptions, thus complicating the task of the SC (McAllister 2021). On the other hand, the EEAS has underlined how EU member states, no matter where they are geographically, face many common threats. This provides the basis for recognising the need for a common strategic culture (Novaky 2020, 7). Yet there is a risk that the SC sets unrealistic expectations. While we cannot expect the SC to deliver on a common strategic culture within the timeframe set (*ibid*, 11), the confidential threat analysis from the EEAS is the basis for the ongoing SC process. The EU needs to define its conceptualisation of the links between risks, security, and associated threats in a coherent whole and this is partly what the SC process is about. In this regard, this article considers the SC to be mainly an aspirational project that is part-coherent and part-inconsistent in its current form. The SC is a new take on an old problem: trying to imbue the EU with strategic actorness and autonomy. It exists within an institutional set-up, but one which at present is concerned with declaratory diplomacy rather than solving real-world problems that require capabilities, resources, and commitment. The EU must also define the balance between civilian and military objectives in the SC and align them with current and probable future security threats. Indeed, advancing plans for military crisis management capabilities should not compete with the need for civilian solutions to problems such as climate change, terrorism, stabilisation missions, and cyber-attacks.

Nevertheless, the SC needs to clarify the relationship between the European Defence Agency (EDA), policy and strategy. The EDA, created in 2007, made a "valiant effort" (Biscop and Coelmont 2011b:151) to promote defence pooling and sharing. But caveats in the Lisbon Treaty, specifically Article 346, undermined Commission attempts to use secondary legislation to weaken the "security exemption," a device through which

member states could bypass single market law regarding procurement. Through Art.346, member states may engage in protectionism under cover of "protecting vital national interests" (Lisbon Treaty 2007, Art.346).

In 2010, the EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) went into sleep mode with no new initiatives until Summer 2015 when EU NAVFOR MED SOPHIA was launched in response to the worsening migration crisis. UK government interest in CSDP declined, arguably frustrated by the lack of commitment from other member states, France excepted, with whom the UK opted instead for bilateral initiatives beginning with the Lancaster House treaties (HM Government 2010) and the subsequent Joint Expeditionary Force (HM Government 2016).

The UK referendum in 2016 began the formal process of the UK leaving the Union. This sparked several EU security and defence initiatives, arguably constituting positive integration, meaning a collective European response to major questions of international affairs, what Michael Smith refers to as a "positive approach (…) asserting European interests and values beyond its borders" (Smith 2004, 5). Positive integration "involves the construction of policies and/or institutions" (Cini and Borragán 2019, 463).

First, EU27 agreed "a permanent command and control structure at the military strategic level within the EU Military Staff" (EEAS 2018). This body, the Military Planning Conduct Capability (MPCC), oversees military training missions in Mali, Somalia, and the Central African Republic, and could become the command centre for a Battlegroup-sized (up to 1500 troops) military intervention. MPCC now works closely with a Joint Support Coordination Cell to assist the military aspects of humanitarian intervention and cooperates with Civilian Planning and Conduct Capability (CPCC). Second, the Commission was mandated to set up the European Defence Fund to support joint capability initiatives by groups of member states. Third, in December 2017 came the launch of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), signalled in the Lisbon Treaty but dormant for almost a decade. The Lisbon Treaty (2007) introduced the PESCO provision for any aspect of further integration, and it was first used in the defence/military field. Fourth, the Council authorised a new instrument, the Coordinated Annual Review of Defence (CARD), reporting to the EDA. This provides a new channel to urge member states to address capability shortfalls, and to monitor progress towards capability enhancement. The CARD brief is to "foster capability development addressing shortfalls, deepen defence cooperation and ensure more optimal use (…) of defence spending plans" (European Defence Agency 2020). Together, the EDF, PESCO and CARD constitute three separate, but interlinked developments intended to enhance security and defence capability (Zandee 2019, 26–7). Likewise, a recent study suggests that heads of government in the European Council have taken real steps towards deeper defence cooperation, citing PESCO, CARD, the EDF and the European Defence Industrial Programme (EDIDP), a Commission initiative, as evidence (Anghel and Fogel 2018). Elsewhere we argue that an overarching EU endeavour to unite all these steps could be a game-changer (Sweeney and Winn 2020, 234).

The UK quitting the EU is a serious blow to EU security and defence ambitions. As the leading defence power and the only member state apart from France to possess force projection capability allied with a strategic culture prepared to countenance combat, its

removal from the EU framework is a major impediment to autonomous EU strategic capability, an ambition central to the EU Global Strategy. Thus, Brexit (the UK departure from the EU) renders the SC of vital significance.

Now, the SC (European Council 2021a) must demonstrate (without obfuscation and without freeriding by member states lacking in resolve to support the EU as an integrated security and defence power) an appropriate and defined level of ambition, and make clear the means, and even a timeframe, to achieve identified strategic goals. Only in the light of such a commitment can the Union expect the UK to return, without equivocation, as a full partner to EU security and defence capability and actorness. As well as signalling a desire for a close EU-UK strategic relationship, the SC must take full account of the EU-NATO partnership, in ways that are complementary, recognising NATO's continuing primacy in territorial defence. The EU should undertake burden-sharing by focusing on its areas of expertise, including a commitment to the security of the global commons, with investment in the maritime, space and cyber domains (ISS 2021, 4; Fiott 2021a, 4; United Nations 2013). Finally, it should complement NATO's own work in progress, a new Strategic Concept due for release at the Madrid Summit in June 2022 (NATO 2021a, 2021b, 2021c).

Novaky (2020) argues that the SC should not be overly ambitious. It is not a replacement for the EU Global Strategy. He suggests it should be limited to concrete answers to four core questions:

> What should the EU's future crisis management ambitions be? What is the EU's role in the protection of the European homeland? What are the Union's priorities for the development of strategic capability? How can the EU work more effectively with its partners to counter Russia and China? (Novaky 2020, 13).

The SC must point the way towards concrete outcomes that will reassure the EU's strategic partners, especially the UN and NATO, including the UK, and so constitute clarity on these four questions. This is a minimum demand from the SC process.

The SC should also deliver a clear message on how to enhance EU maritime security, bearing in mind that 75% of goods entering Europe arrive by sea, and Europe's navies and shipping firms rely on free navigation, and "there is growing recognition that freedom of navigation and the international law of the sea are steadily being eroded" (Fiott 2021b, 2).

This article seeks to advance the proposition that the EU needs to move beyond a declaratory foreign policy to one of substance. Recent literature includes more optimistic analysis (Biscop 2021) as well as more pessimistic assessment (Scazzieri 2020; Mattelaer 2020). We argue that there are reasons for optimism, stemming from wider EU involvement in security-related affairs, the confluence of the EEAS threat analysis and the subsequent SC process. We expect evidence and argument to be more persuasive than the rhetoric of previous "calls to arms." However, we also see problems ahead with the progress of European defence capability.

Below, we set out the policy choices available to the EU, using evidence-based analysis. We argue that progress can only be made when the EU and NATO work together, that the UK needs to be brought into an institutional defence relationship with the EU, and that Europe more generally (not just the EU) should be the basis for the pursuit of strategic autonomy. There are political forces at present that militate against progress in

the short run, such as uncertain transatlantic relations following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, difficulties in relations between the EU and US/UK after the AUKUS agreement (HM Government 2021), differences in policy on Russia/China, and bilateral tensions between France and the UK over post-Brexit issues (Wintour 2021; Piper and Rose 2021). Despite these concerns, the SC process is a positive initiative. It demonstrates increased understanding of the need for concrete outcomes that support NATO and strengthen European security and defence.

Analysing the Strategic Compass

Priorities should be determined on the basis of a comprehensive threat analysis and those priorities should then determine capability development. We anticipate that the Union's priorities are mainly non-military and hybrid civilian-military (CIV-MIL), so they require multiple inputs/solutions, but the EU seems determined to pursue military-based policies to bolster defence cooperation. But the key issues are mainly civilian rather than military. The drivers of EU policy in the SC process appear to be (i) the need to solve real world security problems, and (ii) a need for the EU to pursue political union projects that enhance European integration. Moreover, the High Representative Josep Borrell and member states were tasked with drawing up the SC to guide the further implementation by the Heads of State and Government of EU ambition in security and defence. That ambition had already been established by the EU Global Strategy, as constituting strategic autonomy (EEAS 2016). The SC is a "mid-range strategy" that translates priorities into tangible goals and defines the capabilities the Union should develop. In other words, it complements what the European Defence Agency (EDA) has tried to do since 2007 through continual updating of the European Defence Capability Plan, an evolving needs analysis-based process, designed to assist member states with resource rationalisation and capability enhancement (EDA 2014a). But it is not merely a prompt mechanism for addressing capability shortfalls. If it is to prove useful, the SC must do more. While the EEAS will draw up the final version of the SC, it will be owned by the member states with close involvement of the European Commission and the EDA (Scazzieri 2020). It is clearly advantageous that the SC should reflect a full range of contributions and views, thus avoiding the risk of turf wars over its contents, or indeed its relevance. In the final analysis, the SC process needs to respect and deliver on concrete recommendations and commitments, explaining how the EU should handle difficult challenges (Novaky 2020).

The SC consists of four baskets of analysis – crisis management, resilience, capability development, and partnerships (DGAP 2020, 4; EEAS 2021). DGAP argues for a narrow focus, converging on key priorities. It recommends application of the subsidiarity principle, but with clear channels and modes of interaction between different levels, embracing EU institutions, member states, public and private sectors, civil and military actors, the EU, and NATO. In terms of capability development, it needs to respect the preference of some member states for the primacy of the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP). It needs furthermore to extend complementarity between the EU and NATO, something rendered even more important given the UK's departure from the Union.

In a practical sense, the role of the SC is "(to push) member states towards a common understanding of the key threats to Europe and how to counter them together" (Scazzieri 2020). Former HR Javier Solana attempted the same in 2003, but the threats are now more numerous, and potentially existential for the Union. In 2008 the threat scenario was updated (European Council 2008) and again in the EUGS eight years later (EEAS 2016). The EUGS was launched just days after the UK referendum which marked the beginning of the UK's four-year detachment from the Union. The UK departure has been marked by rancour and deteriorating relations between the UK and EU27, even with France, the UK's main defence partner. This has left a vacuum: the SC cannot involve the UK, despite the essential nature of UK engagement if there is to be anything resembling *European* strategic autonomy.

On the future likelihood of EU-UK defence partnerships, this will depend on a change in the current UK government before any progress can be achieved. The UK's Conservative government rejected any inclusion of foreign and defence policy in the Brexit negotiations. Since the referendum, London has tried to prioritise bilateral relationships with European partners (Whitman 2016). Relations with France have been particularly strained, including defence partnerships (Besch 2021). Whilst we might hope for a close EU-UK foreign and defence policy relationship, the reality seems to be moving in the opposite direction. There is therefore little short-term prospect for optimism in defence and security relations between the UK and EU. Nevertheless, we argue that the UK cannot escape its geography and historic destiny as a power situated within the European continent. In the end, one cannot avoid one's neighbours or deny geography (O'Toole 2019). It will take time to bed down, but with a change of government in the future, one could be more optimistic regarding the UK-EU foreign and defence policy relationship.

Complicating the SC process, and potentially undermining EU crisis management, the financial implications of the Coronavirus pandemic on EU security and defence have been profound. Funding initiatives within the 2021–27 Multiannual Financial Framework took a hit in 2020. The total sum of the MFF is €1,210.9bn, with a further €807 billion under the Next Generation EU Coronavirus Recovery package (European Commission 2021). The pandemic has severely weakened the EU economy, already struggling from the enduring impact of the 2007–10 global financial crisis and subsequent turbulence affecting the single currency, the Euro, with several Eurozone member states locked in a sovereign debt crisis. The pandemic obliged the Commission to reduce by almost half the already derisory €13bn allocated to the new European Defence Fund, cut to just short of €8 billion (Quintin 2020; European Commission 2021). The EDF supports matched funding in joint projects involving groups of member states within PESCO. €6.5 billion allocated to improving military mobility and enhanced infrastructure was cut to €1.7 billion. Another off-budget €10.5 billion fund for the European Peace Facility to support training and equipping of foreign security forces was cut to €5.7 billion (Immenkamp 2021; Morcos and Ruy 2021). The reductions in financial support are significant but given that the EDF for example is only a pump-priming instrument to encourage joint partnerships, it would only ever constitute a small part of the ultimate costs involved in a major multi-partner project, so the cuts may not be that impacting. Moreover, EU financial assistance to CSDP remains a tiny part of the overall

costs, which are primarily borne by member states on a costs-lie-where they fall basis under the so-called Athena system, now superseded, but not radically altered by the European Peace Facility (Vela 2021; European Council 2021b).

The case for pooling and sharing to better confront crisis management has therefore never been greater as Coronavirus also affects member states' economies, with governments looking to reduce defence expenditure. The EDA has long argued that rationalisation between defence budgets, procurement and capability development could bring benefits at little extra cost (Fiott 2021a). But while the pandemic has an adverse effect on the financing of EU security and defence initiatives, it has underlined for member states both EU vulnerability to crises, and the value EU membership provides when member states pull in the same direction. The pandemic:

> has enlarged politicians' grasp of the EU's added value in providing security, be it for strategic or purely economic reasons (Latici 2021).

Furthermore, enhanced cooperation of national defence assets is the only possibility for European defence at present, given the absence of a supranational EU authority in defence. The SC works within this framework with the hope of prompting more integration. Nevertheless, the SC is set against an unpromising economic backdrop. Can there be grounds for optimism that the initiative will bring the strategic turn that EU security and defence policy needs, especially in the context of a threat environment that has never been more pressing?

Besides all the initiatives so far mentioned, there are other steps in the security and defence domain, and combining all of these, there is potentially something significant underway after years of torpor. The EEAS is now established and has the capacity to bring real influence on EU security and defence, even perhaps as a policy actor able to nudge the Council and member states towards a more proactive approach to EU security. This would be a step beyond what has often seemed a sphere of EU reaction to crises rather than one where the Union has the means and the will to confront threats proactively, including in such areas as responding to migration flows, cyber security, and hybrid attacks, a broad spectrum of maritime security threats, threats to the stability and integrity of EU member states in the Baltic region, and potential conflict in the EU neighbourhood. The prospects for the EEAS to "become an influential policy actor in its own right" (Wallace and Reh 2015, 82) are better than they ever have been.

Secondly, and a more significant cause for optimism, is a growing Commission role. The President of the Commission Ursula von der Leyen defined her institution's mandate as a geopolitical one (Blockmans 2020). Commission engagement in security and defence is evidenced by the creation of the DG Defence Industry and Space. This accompanies the Commission Action Plan on synergies between civil, defence and space industries (European Commission 2021). The Action Plan follows up on Council Conclusions from June which welcome the call for more synergies between civil and defence industries, including space, in EU programmes, while respecting the different natures and legal bases of respective EU programmes and initiatives, including the civilian nature of European space programmes, with a view to making more effective use of resources and technologies and creating economies of scale (European Council 2020).

Thirdly, twenty-five MSs are signed up to Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), which offers hope that economies of scale can benefit new joint procurement programmes and improve readiness to support CSDP operations and missions. However, PESCO still awaits confirmation of large-scale initiatives that can deliver a substantial EU-level uplift in defence capability.

These steps, taken together, are significant. But the need for the SC is an indication of ongoing limitations. Scazzieri (2020) underlines continuing differences in interpreting EU needs in responding to priorities agreed in 2016, namely preventing and managing crises in the EU neighbourhood, building up partners' capabilities, and protecting the EU and its citizens. Again, the absence of the UK weakens prospects in all these areas, and critically, member states still have different strategic outlooks, and different strategic cultures.

As well as enhancing crisis management capacity, the SC should define a specifically defence role for the EU beyond the coordination of national defence policies. If it were to achieve this, it could be a step forward in providing specifics in the field of defence, rather than the blurred amalgam of defence and security implied in previous documents and initiatives, no doubt at the insistence of member states unwilling to see the EU achieve a meaningful and coherent defence role. CSDP has therefore been a policy field where lowest common denominator agreement has long been the *modus operandi*. Despite the obfuscation, Lisbon's Art.42.7, the mutual assistance clause, (Lisbon Treaty 2007, Art.42.7) refers to member states' commitment to assist in the event of one coming under attack, echoing NATO's Atlantic Treaty Art.5. The SC needs to be explicit on precisely what Art.42.7 means.

Moreover, there is a risk that the SC ambition amplifies disputes within and between the EU and NATO over strategic autonomy, a concept first aired in the EUGS. A weakness in the EUGS, which the SC must avoid, is its vagueness (Koenig 2020). There is much less risk of discord between the EU and NATO if the SC makes clear what the EU is aspiring to do and how it intends to achieve its goals. In this respect, it must define *the purpose of CSDP*, and its core objectives over the next decade. For example, is CSDP to provide modular crisis management packages to UN peacekeeping operations? Member states should consider raising the level of ambition in civ-mil crisis management, and perhaps merge Military Planning Conduct Capability (MPCC) and Civilian Planning and Conduct Capability (CPCC) in a civil-military planning headquarters.

Another useful step would be to increase the formal involvement of the Commission to push forward a more ambitious civilian-military approach to crisis management and resilience. There should be a concerted effort towards enabling better coordination between land and sea operations and missions, with a focus on amphibious forces able to respond to climate-induced disasters, with scope for a PESCO project to this end. Civil-military coordination would benefit from upgrading joint exercises to better prepare for crises in coastal areas. The EU Concept on Effective Civil-Military Coordination in Support of Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief was approved by the EU Military Committee in 2019 (European Council 2019). This gives a greater role for the Commission in crisis management. National governments will accept Commission involvement in civ-mil matters to the degree that it makes the system more efficient. Anything beyond this will be more problematic.

Resilience, the second of the SC baskets, suggests a renewal of the comprehensive approach (Puglierin 2020). It is a dynamic concept that aims to reduce the negative impact of events. The lines between peace and war and external and internal security are increasingly blurred. New vulnerabilities are exposed, for example by the Coronavirus pandemic. The pandemic, far from diluting the need for the SC to specify hard realities around threats and how to address them, reinforces the urgency:

> The ongoing coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the need to strengthen the EU's competences in areas such as health security, security of supply and strategic stockpiling (Novaky 2020, 6).

Security threats are multidimensional, and affect infrastructure, communications, energy, and health, including food and water security. The SC should strengthen the mutual solidarity clause (42.7) of the Lisbon Treaty, something that has already occurred with the approval of the €750 billion recovery fund to support regions worst affected by the pandemic. If NATO remains the lead actor in territorial defence, the EU is naturally better equipped to lead on ensuring resilience against non-military threats (Biscop 2021, 3). Biscop also highlights that such resilience should take account of Art.42.7: a cyber-attack against one member state should be regarded as an attack against all, and the EU needs to work out what its response should be. Similarly, where China is concerned, the EU can provide leadership, as relations with China concern foreign policy and are not exclusively a defence issue. Relevant concerns include cyber security, the climate crisis, energy, security of maritime passage, and migration: these are mainly spheres of EU concern ahead of NATO, being focused on broader security rather than territorial defence. Similarly, EU neighbourhood interests are for the EU to protect, through support for and engagement with the regions and states concerned, including having full regard for these states' aspirations for a close association with or accession to the European Union where appropriate.

Resilience in the face of complex emergencies would benefit from a joint civilian-military doctrine on how to manage such crises, and the Union should furthermore develop regular joint civ-mil exercises to improve rapid response as required (ISS 2021, 3; Fiott 2021b). The SC should take account of threats arising from the climate crisis, with risks of flooding in literal areas, and the collapse of fishing stocks due to warming waters (Fiott 2021b, 2). Fiott identifies multiple vulnerabilities at sea, including submarine cable routes, gas and oil imports by pipeline, criminal networks affecting shipping, and hybrid disruption involving military harassment of fishing vessels, illegal dredging, sea mining, and the use of coastguards as proxy "military militias," where China, for example, exploits vulnerabilities through a tactic of combining military and constabulary forms of maritime coercion' (Fiott 2021b, 3). He points out that

> the UN Convention for the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the UN Charter and customary international law exist ambiguously alongside each other and none of these cover the use of force at sea and non-military maritime conflict at the same time (*ibid*).

Problems of coercive hybrid tactics at sea are concerning not only in respect of China, but Russia, Turkey, and the Arctic. While there are a range of maritime surveillance capacities, including the European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA), the SafeSeaNet

monitoring service for shipping in EU waters, and the EU Coastguard and Border Agency (FRONTEX) which manages the European Border Surveillance System, and a recently developed Maritime Intelligence Community & Risk Analysis Network (MIC-RAN), Fiott points out that there is:

> no single maritime surveillance hub at the EU level that can respond to the needs of civil and military actors in the maritime domain (Fiott 2021b, 6).

The instruments already mentioned need to be integrated with defence-specific capabilities. The SC could recommend ways to better integrate existing instruments or the creation of a centralising hub, capable of advanced situational awareness covering maritime security, hybrid threats, climate-induced crises, piracy, and critical infrastructure protection.

Concerning the third basket, the vexed question of capability, the SC needs to be clear on whether this applies simply to CSDP crisis management, or to the wider concept of EU security and defence (Fiott 2020). What is intended by "full spectrum" capability? Is this a realistic ambition for the EU, and how does it relate to "strategic autonomy"? There is an urgent need for enhanced harmony and coherence between the Commission, the EEAS, and the EDA to capitalize on initiatives being developed by the EDA and through the European Defence Fund, Horizon Europe, the EU's industrial strategy, the space programme, and the Digital Single Market (Fiott 2020, 11). European navies lack aircraft carriers, submarines, surface combat ships, mine countermeasures vessels, amphibious shipping, support vessels, offshore patrol vessels and personnel (Fiott 2021b, 6). There is ample scope for large scale PESCO projects in these areas to plug capability gaps. "No serious EU level of ambition in maritime security can be achieved without investments and capabilities" (*ibid*, 7). But EU ambitions will not be realised as they depend upon a global naval presence to have a meaningful expeditionary component within defence strategy.

Indeed, force projection is an objective for the EU in crisis management in CSDP to aid civilian objectives alone. Traditional force projection is a NATO collective security function, not one the EU need aspire to. Hence, aircraft carriers would be useful for the rapid deployment of troops and other security-related personnel as required in the context of EU external action objectives. This is partly driven by EU preferences and aspirations for specified forms of force projection predicated on humanitarian principles in CSDP and partly based on potential future needs in an environment where the US is turning towards the Indo-Pacific region.

Fiott refers to the Commission Action Plan linking civil, space and defence industries, and the scope for technological dependencies in security and defence. CARD and PESCO provide important conduits to national systems (Fiott 2020:, 2021b). Finally, SC references to capabilities must enhance EU-NATO cooperation, ensuring access to resources is available as appropriate to whichever organisation leads in responding to a crisis. Evidently regular dialogue is a critical component of effective cooperation.

Finally, on partnerships, the Union is already deeply integrated into many bilateral, transnational, and multilateral partnerships, arguably the key ones being through NATO and the UN. The UN is already an integrated partner in CSDP given that missions and operations are undertaken under the auspices of not only an EU mandate but also UN authorisation, and CSDP missions and operations are often deployed alongside a UN

mission. Other partner organisations include the OSCE, ASEAN, and the African Union. The EU also has its own Eastern Partnership with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine – a source of contestation by Russia (Mattelaer 2020, 12).

In the maritime sphere, cooperation with NATO is fundamental, including joint exercises. But given the range of pressures, the EU will need to entrench bilateral and multilateral efforts with the United States, the United Kingdom, India, Australia, Japan, South Korea, and others (Fiott 2021b, 7). The EU needs to develop "a flexible and attractive naval cooperation framework" with a full set of instruments, reflecting the "toolbox" principles of the comprehensive approach (Smith 2012, 265–6, 2013; Amsterdam Treaty 1997 Article J-7).

Furthermore, the EU has traditionally been conceived as a project for pacifying intra-European relations through economic interdependence, a characterisation that most Europeans readily agree on. Yet its foreign policy persona has been regularly contested (Mattelaer 2020, 12). It would be helpful if the SC could resolve a dilemma with a long history, namely what does the EU mean by a common foreign policy? In this respect, the Union needs to identify a foreign policy agenda based on a clear articulation of its foreign policy interests and priorities. This might constitute a step-change towards a more realist positioning, albeit by an entity that is a group of states, not a sovereign state in the classical IR tradition. The EU could align itself with the UN in seeking a better world, and with NATO in pursuing European security – "ultimately relying on the force of arms and the logic of deterrence" (Mattelaer 2020, 12). The SC might bring clarity on future positioning. But Matteleier highlights the continuing risk of high rhetoric accompanied by little substance (Mattelaer 2020). For almost three decades this has been the result of foreign policy, security and defence requiring unanimity in the absence of qualified majority voting. Lowest common denominator decision-making hinders the quest for coherence and capability. This makes the task for the SC extraordinarily difficult, not so much squaring a circle, but conquering an unclimbable mountain while carrying a fridge. However, the member states have backed the intentions of the SC and will own its eventual recommendations. As security threats increase, there can be no hiding place. The SC will demand action, commitment, and resources. In highlighting the scale of response needed, member states will have little option other than to provide a meaningful capability-oriented response. This is where our optimism is founded, that the SC will achieve significant outcomes.

The Strategic Compass and the EU-NATO partnership

The threat assessment articulated by the SC should be clear on what are the Union's priorities. Member states will then need to be honest about how they wish to address threats, or if they wish to disassociate from the collective EU view. The threat response needs a hard-headed analysis and transparent dialogue about compatibility rather than competition with NATO objectives, and clarity over what constitutes the European Union sphere of responsibility and the EU contribution to NATO.

The Joe Biden US Presidency is a fresh opportunity for European members of NATO to make good on their commitment to the Alliance. Collectively and individually, they need to provide a convincing case for *European* strategic autonomy where this is appropriate. Europe faces new and different times, not least because of the rise of

China. But in addition, reflection on the Trump Presidency, on the 74 million votes Trump garnered in 2020, and on the chaotic US-withdrawal from Afghanistan should provide a warning to the EU that reliance on Washington's security umbrella is unwise, even untenable. "Europeans can no longer assume seamless bipartisan continuity in US foreign policy" (Howorth 2021, 5). Nor should Europeans depend on that continuity. According to some, the capability to defend itself already exists in Europe (Posen 2021), but this needs to be harmonised and integrated in ways that create strategic autonomy (McAllister 2021). Howorth (2021) argues that European strategic autonomy would strengthen the transatlantic alliance, not weaken it as is implied by concerns that European ambition undermines NATO.

The debacle of the allies' disengagement from Afghanistan, and specifically the US withdrawal in August 2021, makes a close EU-UK relationship even more essential. This relationship is key to realising European, as opposed to EU, strategic autonomy. Given the scale of UK capabilities compared with all EU member states apart from France, the obvious logic is that Europe's strategic interests need the highest level of EU-UK cooperation. If a key outcome from the SC process is that it highlights shortfalls in EU member states' commitment to coherence and capability in defence and security, this will underline the need for a flexible arrangement focused on those states willing to fully engage in addressing the threat environment with concrete commitments. Once that is achieved, the next step must be to ensure that the UK is fully onside with the EU in promoting European strategic defence within NATO. A common perspective on European defence is a win-win for both the EU and the UK.

Additionally, PESCO needs a clear shift towards addressing strategic capability shortfalls, and openness to full participation by non-EU members, including the UK. The SC should signal an extension of PESCO, to include operational response to crises, based on a Crisis Response Operation Core (Biscop 2021). Biscop argues that PESCO should enable:

> building a modular multinational force package, with army brigades (or air force squadrons or navy ships) as the national building-blocs but with multinational support units, all permanently anchored in standing multinational divisions and corps (Biscop 2021, 6).

Other PESCO projects should harmonize the equipment of these brigades and provide strategic enablers to deploy them, utilising EDF support and benefitting the European Defence Technological Industrial Base (EDTIB). There are already encouraging steps in this regard, with Norway, Canada and the United States involved in the PESCO Military Mobility project (European Council 2021c; EU Reporter 2021).

According to Biscop, the Crisis Response Operation Core should fully articulate with NATO planning and be available as required to participate in any Article 5 response. The CROC would comprise both heavy armoured formations and, as appropriate, naval and air forces allowing EU allies and partners to contribute in "the domain that best suits them" (Biscop 2021, 7). Such an innovation requires top-down guidance, so this entails integration beyond cooperation to be fully effective. Even if an integrated EU-NATO agreement remains out of reach, the SC still needs to deliver clarity on the EU side regarding its operational contribution and level of ambition.

Indeed, Fiott complains that for all the focus on institutional innovation and capability shortfalls since 2016, there has been a woeful lack of focus on missions and operations (Fiott 2021a, 1–2). Fiott refers to Article 44 that permits a group of member states to undertake military action under CSDP, but such an action requires unanimous Council support. He suggests this unanimity might be revisited by the SC given that it has not been considered since 2015, before the EU Global Strategy was released and before the recent deterioration in the threat environment (*ibid*, 3–4). In addition, the broader security threat extends beyond the primarily land-based orientation of CSDP, though CSDP has launched and maintained naval operations in the Mediterranean (MED SOPHIA, MED IRINI) and off the Horn of Africa (MED ATALATA). The broader point is that EU resilience must also take account of space and the cyber context and enhance its capabilities in seas and oceans where the EU has vital interests, including the protection of undersea cables and pipelines (ISS 2021, 4). Fiott points out that the ATALANTA mandate has expanded to cover not only piracy, but also to counter the illegal flow of drugs and weapons and to ensure freedom of navigation and trade (Fiott 2021a, 4). To sufficiently address such a complex range of objectives, the operation needs a full set of technical support capabilities.

Finally, as suggested above, the UK needs to be welcomed into the PESCO framework and encouraged to lead large-scale capability enabling projects. This would naturally extend to UK incorporation into the EDTIB, something of mutual benefit to the EU and the UK, utilising industrial and research expertise across various sectors, including hybrid civilian-military applications. Such a profound step can only happen after a cooling off period as both parties recover from their discord-plagued divorce, but in the cold light of defence, industrial and economic interests, both will realise that cooperation and even integration is mutually beneficial. A thawing in relations will need some key protagonists in the divorce proceedings to have departed the stage. However, the EU will be a far more attractive partner to the UK if it is manifestly serious regarding its own defence and security interests and commitments. While the SC process is one for the EU and its member states, the response to its conclusions must involve dialogue with the UK, and sooner rather than later.

Conclusion – beyond the Strategic Compass: a case for optimism?

How far does the SC narrow differences in member states' thinking regarding threats and capability needs, and how to address them? If it achieves that, it will have been worthwhile and could be a major step forward. Coherence and convergence between EU and member state defence aspirations is a minimum requirement.

In summary, the EU defence role, and the ambition of the Union's common security and defence policy, needs to be clarified. Is the CSDP ambition to respond to high intensity attacks, or instead to leave this to NATO, and for the EU to focus on civilian crisis management, peacekeeping, and defence of the global commons, such as the High Seas, space, and cyber security? What interpretation do member states put on Art.42.7 and mutual assistance? EU relevance to defence has always been handicapped by a lack of political will and capability, and a lack of coherence, and clarity. The SC needs to deliver where previous efforts have failed. The context is not reassuring, but a worsening and more complex threat environment demands a clear response. The SC

will demonstrate that there is no alternative to a more resilient, more capable, and more strategic European Union. A positive sign is that the SC builds on steps already underway since 2016. As well as institutional initiatives referred to in this article, the Union has made significant strides towards a more effective instrumentation to enhance both security and defence, including capability development and defence industrial policy (Nunes 2018). There has been EU support for dual-use transportation infrastructure and capacities to counter hybrid threats such as manipulation of the information environment, attacks on critical infrastructure and election interference. There is now greater linkage between justice and home affairs and security and defence, assisting cross-border threats such as cyber-attacks, and irregular migration (Fiott and Lindstrom 2021, 4). Progress in these areas allows for cautious optimism that the SC will bring further tangible outcomes. The EU is moving beyond crisis management and capacity development, and the more comprehensive civilian-military approach is cause for optimism that member states and the Union as a whole are jointly committed to enhancing European security and defence.

We have highlighted the integrated civilian-military approach as fundamental to the SC process. Fiott and Lindstrom (2021) emphasise the value in hybrid technology and capacities that address multiple threats, citing cyber security applications, sea-based assets, and space-based capabilities to monitor arms smuggling, piracy, illegal migration, and climate change. Member states must provide investment, while ensuring effective communication with citizens, vital to public understanding of the civil benefits, while also serving defence needs.

There remains a legacy of economic stress from the 2008 financial crisis, from the euro-crisis, and the Covid-19 pandemic, and EU-UK relations are rather poor. But with a worsening international situation and a raised level of external threat, there is a better understanding of shared interests among member states. These comprise territorial integrity, security of the Union's external borders, resilience in the face of pandemics, food, water and energy security, environmental sustainability, the integrity and proper functioning of the single market, safe and secure communication networks, cyber security, combatting serious and organised crime, terrorism, and extremism, and more besides. Shared interests are after all what led to the SC being commissioned, and it has duly become a focus of attention for HR-VP Borrell, the EEAS, and the member states (Scazzieri 2020). The Union is therefore in a better position to undertake a hard-headed study of the conclusions from the SC process. It can then take the necessary steps to deliver on its demands and do so while consolidating and materially improving cooperation with multilateral partners, above all NATO, and with bilateral partners, notably the UK, but also the US, which will welcome decisive outcomes from the process.

We have also argued that the effectiveness of the EU mission to secure its own interests through CSDP will be enhanced by a renewed commitment to the comprehensive approach. But the SC highlights both the lack of tools and weaknesses in the tools already available. The SC will highlight what needs to be done, and what should be prioritised.

We also suggest that where the partnership element of the SC is concerned, European strategic autonomy with full engagement of the United Kingdom is a better and more capable prospect than EU strategic autonomy. UK involvement with PESCO in developing strategic enabling capability (Besch 2021), and full integration with the European

Defence Technological and Industrial Base could deliver *European* capability, and *European* strategic autonomy where needed. This is essential given the geopolitical pressures facing the continent. A close EU-UK relationship will be difficult to achieve given the mood music around the UK's departure from the Union in 2020, where even relations between Paris and London have suffered despite their close bilateral defence ties. Future UK governments may adopt a more emollient position in respect of relations with the EU. Ultimately a close security and defence partnership between the EU and the UK is in the joint interest of both.

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