THE EU STRATEGIC COMPASS-BETWEEN STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN, AT THE CROSSROADS OF THE OLD AND THE NEW

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Abstract:

The security environment of the European continent has changed significantly in the last 10 years, from an approach dominated by multilateralism, expansion of the EU to the East and an optimistic view on the future as geared towards cooperation and development to an environment dominated by crisis of various natures (economic, migration, climatic, pandemic, conflict) peer competition and revanchist desires of rewriting the borders. Both NATO and EU had to adapt to these changes and develop more appropriate response mechanisms to the complex challenges that are constantly emerging and the first step in this process is the development of new strategic documents. The aim of this paper is to provide an analysis of the EU Strategic Compass, by examining its strengths and weaknesses, the potential ways of action that can be identified, with emphasis on the military implications.

Key words: Strategic Compass, strategy, action plan, rapid deployment capacity

1. Introduction

The security environment of the European continent has changed significantly in the last 10 years, from an approach dominated by multilateralism, expansion of the EU to the East and an optimistic view on the future as geared towards cooperation and development to an environment dominated by crisis of various natures (economic, migration, climatic, pandemic, conflict) peer competition and revanchist desires of rewriting the borders. Both NATO and EU had to adapt to these changes and develop more appropriate response mechanisms to the complex challenges that are constantly emerging and the first step in this process is the development of new strategic documents. The aim of this paper is to provide an analysis of the EU Strategic Compass, by examining its strengths and weaknesses, the potential ways of action that can be identified, with emphasis on the military implications.

2. The Strategic Compass – between strategy and action plan, the old and the new

The EU is not at its first attempt to develop a common security strategy. The first attempt was in 2003, with the development of the European security Strategy – a secure Europe in a better world, later replaced by the European Union Global Strategy from 2016. The process was not an easy one, as the member states had different views on the extent to which such document is needed in the first place, or to the role the EU should have in terms of security and defense. In this context, the Strategic Compass is clearly the result of the dramatic changes in the European security and defense environment, and it can be argued that it is the document that gets closer to the concept of a security strategy.

Presented as a "guide to the necessary development of the EU security and defense agenda for the next 10 years"[1], it has the particularity of attempting to move from the more generic, politically correct and non-committal wording and structure of the previous two documents to a more concrete approach, supported by a clear statement of resolve, ways of action and deadlines. The document states that "if you want dialogue, diplomacy and multilateralism to succeed, you need to put power behind it"[2], which is in itself a powerful statement, as it clearly states the EU's intention to play a more proactive role as a security actor. During the Ukraine conflict, the EU has indeed shown an unprecedented level of decisiveness in its actions, from political statements to imposing sanctions and providing aid, but this does not mean that the differences in views, actions and interests of its member states have been suddenly erased. Germany's hesitancy in imposing tougher sanctions, Hungary's overt pro-Russian stance, the pressures exerted on the national governments by various business groups affected by the imposition of sanctions make the implementation into practice of the above statement an extremely challenging task. Another element of novelty, that brings this document closer to being a security strategy, is the fact that it is based on a threat analysis aimed at identifying the common threats, which should be adapted at least every three years based on the evolution of the security environment.

Russia is identified as the main threat to the European and Euro-atlantic security security in both of the documents analyzed, although with some slight differences in the approach, deriving from the different nature of the two organizations. The NATO Strategic Concept emphasizes the military aspects of the threat, mentioning that Russia "seeks to establish spheres of influence…through the use of conventional, cyber and hybrid means", without going into details, but insisting on the threat posed by Russia's potential use of nuclear forces, the disruption of freedom of navigation in the North Atlantic and its military built-up in the Baltic, Black Sea and Mediterranean regions.[3] The Strategic Compass focuses also on the economic and energy threats posed by Russia, as the EU's nature as an economic and political organization, the close economic ties some of its members have with Russia, but also the high dependence of some of the member states on Russian energy makes it especially vulnerable to such tactics. Thus, the document mentions the threats posed by Russia's use of "military force combined with hybrid tactics, cyberattacks, foreign information manipulation and interference, economic and energy coercion and aggressive nuclear rethoric" [4] The countries and regions of focus in relation to the Russian threat are also somewhat different in the two documents. In addition to the regions mentioned above, the Strategic Concept focuses on more generic regions, such as "countries to our East and

South", the High North. EU's Strategic Compass specifically mentions countries such as Georgia and Republic of Moldova, where Russia exercises its influence, but also the indirect threats to the European security by Russia's actions in Libya, Syria, Central African Republic and Mali, reflecting some of the member states interests in the area (such as France).

China is mentioned as a challenge to the security and interests of both NATO and EU, but the way the threat is approached reflects again the differences between the two organizations. The Strategic Concept reflects views that are quite similar to the US approach, focusing on China's use of political, military and economic tools to increase its influence. The competition between the two superpowers is and will continue to be a feature of the international security environment, and it will most likely increase in the future, regardless of the political changes in Washington. Although China exerts its influence in the European region too, the European members of NATO tend to have a more nuanced approach to China in terms of national policies. The Strategic Concept approach to China clearly reflects the United States view on China, but also its influence in setting the future vision for the Alliance. It emphasizes the challenges posed by China's attempt to control "key technological and industrial sectors, critical infrastructure and strategic materials and supply chains", but also its use of economic means to exert influence and create dependence and its attempt to exert influence in "the space, cyber and maritime domains"[5]. Although the document states that the alliance remains "open to constructive engagement", the tone hints towards the Alliance viewing China as a rival and competitor.

Interestingly, the Strategic Compass starts by defining China as "a partner for cooperation, an economic competitor and a systemic rival" [6] is a somewhat confusing combination of the former, more cooperative approach, of the EU towards China and the realities of China's assertive policy of projecting power at global level. The cooperation part is related to the need of common action in the issue of climate change, but it is very brief and does not necessarily justify its first place in the statement, except as a gesture of good will towards China. The document continues with emphasizing the challenges China may pose to the EU from an economic point of view, due to the disparities in the level of openness in terms of market access and society as a whole. The military dimension of the threat are also mentioned, but at a more generic level than in the Strategic concept, using diplomatic language and avoiding the specifics provided in the NATO document.

The conflict in Ukraine, like any other serious crisis, has functioned as a magnifying glass for the good, the bad and the ugly in both EU and NATO, and it can be argued that even more so in the case of the EU. The reasons for this derive from the very nature of the two organizations. NATO is primarily a political military organization and has acted as such, with all the previous transatlantic divisions regarding burden sharing and other matters becoming less relevant. Russia's aggression towards Ukraine has brought a new life to the Alliance, providing a renewed purpose of existence through the existence of a common enemy, highlighting common security and defense concerns and even providing a very realistic justification for increased military spending and modernization of the armed forces (a subject that had previously generated dissent between some of the allies). The EU, on the other hand, is mainly an economic union, underlined through the framework of a political union. The attempt to create a security and defense dimension derives from the desire and ambitions of some of the member states (such as France), but also from the economic, political and security international environment and the need to compete in the economic area with national superpowers such as the United States and China. It was not its main role, but as the conflict in Ukraine has clearly highlighted, the EU can no longer afford to ignore it if it wants

to remain a relevant actor. The main challenge is to be able to live up to these ambitions. The Strategic Compass highlights this by stating that the European Union is more united than ever. We are committed to defend the European security order… supporting Ukraine in facing Russia's military aggression, we are showing an unprecedented resolve to restore peace in Europe, together with our partners." The political message of resolve and unity is to be appreciated, but the reality is that the European Union still has to overcome many challenges in this respect. One such challenge is Hungary, who has openly opposed the energy sanctions against Russia, refused to provide weapons to Ukraine or to allow their transfer by other countries through its territory and forcefully replayed Russia's narratives on how sanctions against Russia are actually harming the EU member states economies, by increasing inflation and causing an energy crisis. Hungary's approach has highlighted with painful clarity that the EU lacks many of the mechanisms to ensure a common stance, or even to advance its values among its members. No matter how dissonant the policy of a member nation may be compared to the EU position, that member state remains a sovereign nation and cannot be forced to act in a certain way or to leave the EU, which is done on a voluntary basis. This is not necessary bad, but it highlights the huge challenges the EU faces in becoming a meaningful actor in the security area.

Maritime security is considered a priority in both documents, with the Baltic, Black Sea and Mediterranean Sea and Arctic regions specifically mentioned in both documents as areas of interest and concern. While NATO's Strategic Concept view these areas mainly from a military point of view, EU's Strategic Compass takes a broader approach, mentioning the Atlantic Ocean, the areas between the Gulf of Aden and the Strait of Hormuz and beyond the Strait of Malacca as areas of interest, deriving from EU's broader view on security. These areas are important to the EU as "maritime zones, critical sea lanes of communication and several maritime choke-points as well as seabeds", as framework for EU's economic development based on trade, transport and energy security. Considering the rise of Eurasian countries like China and India in terms of trading power, the EU can no longer ignore the need to retain its relative power in this area and the Strategic Compass aims to give some direction in this area, among others, in the "act" section of the document.

In the section "Act", the strategic compass attempts to provide more specific action guidelines, accompanied by objectives. Although it is an advance compared to previous Eu strategic documents, which highlighted a lack of common strategy and concrete steps in the field of security and defense, the Strategic Compass still prefers a prudent approach, with smaller steps that could be agreed by all member states. For instance, in respect to the military domain, and stimulated by the changes in the threat environment and the more aggressive Russian posture, the documents mentions the need for the development of an EU Rapid Deployment Capacity, "that will allow us to swiftly deploy a modular force of up to 5 000 troops, including land, air and maritime components, as well as the required strategic enablers"[7]. This is actually a way to revamp the almost-defunct EU Battlegroups, with what appeared to be a rather ambitious goal of building an EU force of brigade level, but considering the less than glorious track record of the EUBGs and the factors that led to their slide into irrelevance, the task appears to be quite a challenge. The first question is the availability of the forces provided by the member nations and their willingness to embark in common operations, considering the political divergences still present even after Russia's attack on Ukraine. The document appears to be aware of this challenge, as it specifies that "the development of this capacity will be based on operational scenarios that will initially be focused on rescue and evacuation operations, as well as the initial phase of stabilization

operations", to be followed by their use in "different phases of an operation in a non-permissive environment, such as initial entry, reinforcement or as a reserve force to secure an exit" [8]. The latter phrase is relevant, as it highlights EU's more realistic approach in terms of the need to have more than an initial entry force, considering the scenarios it may face at its periphery and the need to ensure rotation of the forces, translated in a number of minimum three brigades. Still, the concrete way in which these forces are to be provided is still a matter to be established, as "a comprehensive and complete overview of all available elements will give us the necessary flexibility to tailor our force to the nature of the crisis and to the requirements and objectives of the operation as decided by the Council". In other words, at this point, the EU is yet unclear in which type of operations should this Rapid Deployment Capacity be used, for the achievement of what objectives and, probably most importantly, with what forces and resources, especially considering that most of the EU members are also NATO members and are already pledging some of their forces for NATO operations. This delicate matter is hinted in the following phrase that very vaguely states that these objectives will be achieved "by using the substantially modified EU Battlegroups, member States military forces or a combination of the two".

Another serious challenge for an effective EU military approach to crises is hinted in the innocuous phrase "for the effective deployment, we commit to providing associated assets and the necessary strategic enablers, in particular strategic transport, force protection, medical assets, cyber defense, satellite communication and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities" which "we will develop where necessary". Although the European NATO members have attempted to solve this issue through collectively pooled resources, such as the Strategic Airlift Interim Solution, the multinational acquisition and operation of C17 via the Strategic airlift Consortium and the 8 nations group purchase of Airbus A400M, Europe has a significant strategic airlift shortfall [9] which cannot be filled without NATO's support and would require substantial investments, which few of the EU members would be willing to make in short and medium term, considering the economic difficulties generated by the crisis in Ukraine.

The situation is not better in terms of satellite communication, as the EU does not have a dedicated infrastructure for this purpose and to expect its development in medium term would be quite idealistic.

A positive aspect of the Strategic Compass is that it offers a clear and updated military level of ambition, namely for the EU to be able to plan and conduct, by 2025, all non-executive military missions and two small scale or one medium scale executive operation, as well as live exercises [10]. Another plus is the fact that the document is realistic enough to acknowledge that there is a gap between the level of ambition and the resources [11], emphasizing the need to enhance the capabilities, critical enablers and equipment, but unfortunately it remains in the same category of many other EU documents, as it does not offer a concrete guideline, objectives or deadlines for achieving this ambition.

The Strategic Compass also emphasizes another aspect that in reality is quite difficult to achieve, namely greater flexibility in the decision making process, in terms of command and control and in a broader sense of "allowing a group of willing and able Member states to plan and conduct a mission or operation within the EU framework and under the political oversight of the Council". Why would these member states want to embark in such a costly endeavor, outside the NATO framework, by devoting additional forces, remains yet to be determined.

One word that appears quite often in the document in relation to EU's military ambitions is "exercises", as a pre-requisite of ensuring readiness and interoperability, in order to meet the defense and security threats and challenges. The emphasis placed on the need to conduct advance planning and live exercises in all domains, within "the EU framework, with the progressive involvement of the Military Planning and Conduct Capability" [12], in order to develop the aforementioned EU Rapid Deployment Capacity is to be appreciated, but this approach ignores a crucial aspect: how will the costs of these exercises be covered, considering that the EU member states that are also NATO members are also involved in NATO exercises and the costs of these exercises are not small. For example, the NATO Defender 2020 exercise, covering tactical live fire drills up to division level operations, involving 17,000 troops from European allied countries, cost the US alone 340 million dollars. [13]. In a very rough estimate, just one live exercise involving the 5,000 troops of the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity could cost around 100 million dollars. And the issue is not only a related to financial resources, but also to other types of resources, such as troops, logistic support, ammunition, fuel, that would have to be provided and/or replaced by the EU members. The issue is acknowledged in the "Prepare" part of the document, but in general terms, of "re-assessing the scope and definition of common costs to enhance solidarity and stimulate participation in military missions and operations, as well as exercise related costs", without going into more specific details regarding the mechanisms and financial arrangements.

In terms of enhancing the maritime security, the document emphasized yet again the need to improve interoperability through live exercises, consolidating the Coordinated Maritime presence and developing the two maritime operations in the "areas of crucial strategic interests for the EU", but that is about all the extent of the measures the EU plans to take in this domain, as per the Strategic Compass. Considering the acknowledgement of China's increased presence as a systemic rival and economic competitor, there is one area of action that is conspicuously missing from the Strategic Compass, namely the need to counter China's increased presence in European (and global) ports, through acquisitions of shares in companies and port infrastructures. In the past decade, China managed to acquire significant control, through targeted investments, in 13 ports in Europe, that account for approximately 10% of Europe's shipping container capacity [14]. Even recently, China's COSCO bought a 24,9% stake in the German port of Hamburg [Reuters], generating vigorous protests among the opposition, concerned about a potential strategic dependence. In view of the mistakes made by several EU countries (Germany included) in allowing a high dependence on Russian energy, such a strategic dependence could prove a significant vulnerability for the future security of EU, yet it is not mentioned in the Strategic Compass. One of the reasons could be a lack of consensus among the member states regarding Chinese strategic foreign investments in EU countries, but this is a significant drawback for a document which has the ambition of tracing the path for the future security strategy of the EU. In the "Invest" section the document does acknowledge the need to enhance technological sovereignty and reduce strategic dependencies, including "making full use of the Union's framework and national mechanisms for the screening of foreign direct investments…including in defense sector"[15], but no specific mention is made to the afore mentioned issue.

An interesting novelty, compared to the previous EU strategic documents, is the recognition given to the need to invest in military mobility, through strengthening the dual use transport infrastructure and harmonizing cross border procedures [16]. The document even provides some ambitious deadlines for the implementation of such measures, but how

will they be achieved into practice "without prejudice to the next EU multiannual financial framework" remains to be sees, especially in respect to the dual use transport infrastructure projects.

The Strategic Compass has the merit of clearly highlighting the existence of critical capability gaps, the need to identify more precisely the extent of those gaps and the need to invest in the development of future capabilities. In this sense, the strategic orientations on page 43 highlight the need to "spend more and better" on defense (an area of intense discussions over the Atlantic in the last years), the need to enhance EU's defense capability planning and development (through a much needed revision of the capability planning scenarios in the headline goal process) and the need to embed the EU defense planning process with the national defense planning. This last point remains a challenge, especially considering the need to harmonize the processes with NATO, to avoid unnecessary overlaps, increased bureaucracy and waste of resources. Considering the lessons identified and learned during the process of development and improvement of the NATO Defense Planning Process, this will definitely remain a challenging area for the future.

In terms of key capabilities to be developed in order to reduce fragmentation, the document identifies six such capabilities (Main Battle Tank, Soldier Systems, European Patrol Class surface ship, A2AD capacities and Countering Unmanned Aerial Systems, Defense in Space and Enhanced military mobility). How well the development of this capabilities will be achieved depends on a lot of factors, from the political will of the member states to the capacities of the national defense industries and the project of development of the "Eurodrone" is not a very encouraging example. The collaboration of France, Germany, Italy and Spain for a 1,7 billion project of development of an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), hailed as an example of "strategic autonomy", has been hindered by differences in requirements from the participating states (in respect to the purpose and weapons) and even disagreements regarding the engine manufacturer. [17]

Finally, the document proposes the increased use of cooperation agreements such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation and the European Defense Fund, in order to enhance EU's military capabilities. Although laudable, these initiatives will remain heavily dependent on the political will of the participating countries.

3. Conclusion

Although NATO's New Strategic Concept is a realistic and well developed document, it only represents the continuation of the Alliance's already established position and a reaffirmation of some older, but still valid strategic and military principles. The EU's Strategic Compass, on the other hand, marks a more significant advance, in terms of EU's willingness to enhance its security and defense posture. The document has some undeniable strong points, such as being based on a threat analysis (for the first time), providing both a strategic view and some concrete ways of action, complete with objectives and deadlines, in terms of an EU rapid reaction capacity, development of EU capabilities and enhancing the collective resilience.

The clear affirmation of a new military level of ambition is both a strength and an issue, as it does not specify if the former level of ambition, outlined in the Helsinki Headline Goal, is still valid – not a good start for the defense planning process. Another drawback of a document aimed at covering all aspects of security (including economic, energy, food,

technological etc) is that it remains at a very generic level in respect to the measures to be taken in these areas, at least in comparison with the military aspects, which are better outlined. Finally, the document fails to give more specific guidelines on precisely from what sources will the costs of the proposed measures be covered.

The Strategic Compass in an interesting and ambitious document, more suited to the current security challenges than its predecessors, but it will prove equally useless without concrete measures to put it into practice.

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