




## OPINION PAPER


# How Far is the European Defence Army from Sprouting?

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EUROPE

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In the past year, the EU has witnessed an exceptional rise in the demand for security and defence<sup>1</sup>. To overcome the many geopolitical challenges that await Brussels, several EU top leaders have endorsed the need for the union to become a military and technological actor on the international stage. The timeless idea of an EU army has thus re-emerged with insistence.

Despite the many proactive statements in favour of it, there are several reasons to believe the EU is rather far from shaping its own military response. First, the understanding of security and the perception of threats - which would require strong unity - is diverse in the bloc.

The EU's fragmentation due to diverging national interests is likely to fuel internal divisions over funding as well as the geographical areas where to deploy. Second, national armies are the main pillars of defence in the continent, and for twenty-one member states collective defence is NATO. Although Washington has repeatedly welcomed the importance of a stronger and more capable European defence<sup>2</sup>, a sovereign EU in terms of security and defence that is independent from and equal to the U.S. remains non-negotiable for many years to come.

## Missing Pieces

Concerning defence cooperation, the EU has put in place numerous tools in the past two decades. Following the establishment of the Common and Security Defence Policy (CSDP) in 1999 (later adjusted in 2009) comprising permanent political, military and civilian structures, the EU's approach towards crisis management had recourse to a broader set of security and defence initiatives as outlined in the 2016 EU Global Strategy (EUGS). Among others, the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the European Defence Fund (EDF), and the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) were created to, respectively, finance and develop military capabilities, stimulate strategic investment in the industry and identify potential cooperation areas.

The inadequacy of certain projects<sup>3</sup>, the failure to formally adopt the EUGS by the member states<sup>4</sup>, and most importantly the fast-changing international challenges have led the EU to embark in a two-year process to develop a 'Strategic Compass' for its security and defence policy, starting in June 2020. The Strategic Compass document - that should be adopted by the European Council in March 2022<sup>5</sup>, and plans to be implemented by the member states by 2030 - aims to deliver greater clarity on the union's ambition to become a security provider by: *acting* rapidly and robustly when a crisis

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<sup>1</sup> France24. (2021). Proposals for an EU army re-emerge after Afghan pullout – but many remain 'hard to convince'. September 2.

<https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20210902-proposals-for-an-eu-army-re-emerge-after-afghan-pullout-%E2%80%93-but-many-remain-hard-to-convince>

<sup>2</sup> The White House. (2021). United States-France Joint Statement. October 29. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/10/29/united-states-france-joint-statement/>

<sup>3</sup> Politico. (2021). Eu military projects face delays, leaked document shows. July 12. <https://www.politico.eu/article/leaked-document-shows-delays-in-eu-military-pact/>

<sup>4</sup> Nováky, N. (2020). The Strategic Compass. Charting a New Course for the EU's Security and Defence Policy *Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies*, Page 2. [https://www.martenscentre.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CES\\_POLICY-BRIEF\\_TheStrategicCompass-V1.pdf](https://www.martenscentre.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CES_POLICY-BRIEF_TheStrategicCompass-V1.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Fiott, D., Lindstrom, G. (2021). STRATEGIC COMPASS. New bearings for EU security and defence?. *European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS)*, Page 6. [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/CP\\_171\\_0.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/CP_171_0.pdf)

erupts, *securing* EU citizens from emerging threats, *investing* more and better in capabilities and innovative technologies, and *partnering* with others to achieve common goals<sup>6</sup>. Despite the goodwill to put remedy to the elusiveness of previous attempts, the distance parting ambition and reality appears vast. The risk of injecting an additional tool that lacks to show how the union will overcome the affiliates' divergence of views remains present, as some experts noted that member states are likely to continue prioritising threats vital to their own national interests as well as create spontaneous sub-groups based on their overlapping threat perceptions<sup>7</sup>.

The soon-to-be-approved document includes the development of an 'EU Rapid Deployment Capacity' that will allow a quicker and more flexible deployment of up to 5000 troops. This underlines the shared intention to respond vigorously to imminent threats by establishing *how* to deploy. On the other hand, it lacks to determine *where* to deploy and, strictly connected, who will define such. For instance, China is regarded as a "partner, economic competitor and a systemic rival"<sup>8</sup>.

Russia is both listed among the regional threats the bloc is facing and described as a strategic partner to engage with in some specific issues such as climate change. The perception of Russia threatening the continent's stability varies from the Baltic and east European states (more exposed as well as affected by the Soviet experience) to the EU western member states (less grudgingly inclined to come to terms with Moscow). Missions in the Sahel are a priority for Paris but not for the EU's northern member states. The EU's approach in war-torn Libya represents another topical example, with Paris and Rome having supported opposing sides for long.

Needless to say, within the bloc there is a diverse perception of threats and the assessment of these must require not only unanimity but also a strong leadership capable of commanding - not requesting - forces and resources<sup>9</sup>. By missing even one of these pieces, the EU would not be able to react to crisis situations, as it had already occurred with the 2007 established battlegroups - although crafted, they have never been used due to disputes over funding and reluctance to deploy<sup>10</sup>.

## The Nuclear Umbrella

It is not accidental that the 'Strategic Compass' has been initiated under the 2020 German Council presidency. The preparatory call for a detailed threat analysis to cement the foundations for a shared

<sup>6</sup> Leaked version of the 'Strategic Compass'. (2021). November 9. Pages 2-3. <https://club.bruxelles2.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/boussolestrategiquecom-off@ue211109.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Lazarou, E., Tothova, L. (2021). Strategic Compass: Towards Adoption. *European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS)*. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2021/698818/EPRS\\_ATA\(2021\)698818\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2021/698818/EPRS_ATA(2021)698818_EN.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Leaked version of the 'Strategic Compass'. (2021). November 9. Page 8.

<sup>9</sup> Rynning, S. (2003). The European Union: Towards a Strategic Culture?. *Security Dialogue*. 34(4), 494. [https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0967010603344007?casa\\_token=b62QszXFDBYAAAAA:wKbx--UUnbDDbjW19VUfKOWGXQVr-Q4rB\\_SW4eUfVKxDqJAaRSvfdWI8yBN-8GCB6jqUW5-aO2Q\\_p.494](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0967010603344007?casa_token=b62QszXFDBYAAAAA:wKbx--UUnbDDbjW19VUfKOWGXQVr-Q4rB_SW4eUfVKxDqJAaRSvfdWI8yBN-8GCB6jqUW5-aO2Q_p.494)

<sup>10</sup> Euractiv. (2021). LEAK: What the EU's future military strategy could look like. November 10. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/leak-how-the-eus-future-military-strategy-could-look-like/>, also see The Guardian. (2021). Von der Leyen: EU must acquire 'political will' to build own military. September 15. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/15/von-der-leyen-eu-state-of-union-speech-political-will-build-own-military>

vision for EU defence and security<sup>11</sup> coincided with the German military capability build up<sup>12</sup> - recently subject to an enormous boost in defence spending in light of the latest developments in Ukraine<sup>13</sup>. In her own words, the former Defence Minister of Germany Anne Kramp-Karrenbauer indicated that Berlin has a “special duty towards Europe’s security because of its geographical position in the centre of Europe and its economic strength”<sup>14</sup>.

Also, she emphasised the relevancy of its leading role by stating that “without a Bundeswehr [German Armed Forces] that can be deployed in a variety of ways, there can be no Europe capable of action”<sup>15</sup>. It must be noted that such a German-led European defence response has been explicitly conceived within the NATO framework. Nevertheless, this raises legitimate doubts on the actual risk of duplication<sup>16</sup> among the structures and, geopolitically speaking, on its compatibility with the founding bricks of the union and the north Atlantic alliance.

The original assumption behind the creation of a European framework (that came to be called the ‘Schuman Plan’) envisaged that the integration of Germany into a permanent European structure was the best way to prevent it from being a military threat to its neighbours<sup>17</sup>, as Robert Schuman himself had demanded its “perpetual neutralisation”<sup>18</sup> in the April 1949 secret meeting that launched NATO in Washington. Basically, both NATO and the first embryo of the EU were created to guard Germany<sup>19</sup>.

Ever since WWII's aftermath, European defence and security has been and still is highly dependent on the U.S. presence of troops and nuclear deterrence on the continent. Therefore, it is hard to imagine the EU speeding up its own military efforts out of America’s command. Especially with the EU’s biggest economy potentially taking the lead.

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<sup>11</sup> European Parliamentary Research Service (2021). The European Union's 'Strategic Compass' process. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/EPRS/graphs/EPRS\\_Strategic\\_Compass\\_final.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/EPRS/graphs/EPRS_Strategic_Compass_final.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> Politico. (2020). Europe still needs America. November 2. <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-still-needs-america/>

<sup>13</sup> DW. (2022). Germany commits €100 billion to defense spending. February 27. <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-commits-100-billion-to-defense-spending/a-60933724>

<sup>14</sup> WWSW. (2021). German government registers record military budget and gears up for war. February 12. <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2021/02/13/mili-f13.html>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Politico.(2021). Stoltenberg: European allies were consulted over Afghanistan. September 11. <https://www.politico.eu/article/afghanistan-europe-nato-stoltenberg-allies-consulted/>

<sup>17</sup> CVCE. (2016). The origins of the Schuman Plan. [https://www.cvce.eu/en/recherche/unit-content/-/unit/5cc6b004-33b7-4e44-b6db-f5f9e6c01023/fbc68da6-a05f-478c-8b9f-5137316120bb/Resources#8cbf9f67-4b14-41d3-afe6-24419adc980e\\_en&overlay](https://www.cvce.eu/en/recherche/unit-content/-/unit/5cc6b004-33b7-4e44-b6db-f5f9e6c01023/fbc68da6-a05f-478c-8b9f-5137316120bb/Resources#8cbf9f67-4b14-41d3-afe6-24419adc980e_en&overlay)

<sup>18</sup> The National Security Archive. (n.d.). “Memorandum of Conversation,” 3 April 1949, The White House. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nsa/DOCUMENT/200008/01-03.htm>

<sup>19</sup> Geopolitical Futures. (2022). The German question. January 28. <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/the-german-question-2/>

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