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Major milestones in the EU's agenda in security and defence

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Abstract:

During the first half of the year, the European institutional framework is going to see important changes in the areas related to security and defence. NATO is defining a new strategic concept that it wants to officially approve during the 2022 Madrid summit, at which a new secretary-general will also be appointed. On the other hand, the European Union is developing the so-called 'strategic compass' which aims to provide a perspective conducive to a common strategic culture. In addition, both organizations plan to issue a new joint statement that will further strengthen their mutual collaboration. In this article we analyse these initiatives.

Keywords:

European Union, NATO, Strategic Compass, strategic autonomy, NATO strategic concept

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INTRODUCTION

The first half of 2022 is proving to be a very active year for Europe in the fields of security and defence. The two major organisations of the old continent, NATO and the European Union (EU), are both in the process of defining their strategic lines. The Atlantic Alliance wants to approve a new strategic concept (the last one dates back to 2010), while at the same time it has to appoint a new Secretary General for the organisation, both of which are scheduled for the Madrid summit in June 2022.

Meanwhile, the EU is developing the so-called 'strategic compass', as an extension of the 2016 strategy, aiming to enable the Union and its member states to strengthen their security and defence, detailing the tools and initiatives that will ensure more robust, rapid and decisive external action. This initiative would encompass another, also of a military nature, which consists of setting up a rapid deployment force (some 5,000 troops) to which the participating countries would contribute different modules of capabilities and forces.

In addition, the two organisations are expected to issue a new joint statement which, together with the two previous statements in 2016 and 2018, will strengthen, deepen and boost mutual collaboration between the two organisations.

NATO'S NEW STRATEGIC CONCEPT

"Our security environment is more complex and contested than ever before ... We are adapting to a more competitive world."

The North Atlantic organisation has embarked on renewing its strategic concept, the seventh in its 72-year history, the last version of which dates back to 2010. This will require weathering a stormy sea churned up by a complex web of security problems and threats that the Atlantic community is beginning to feel increasingly uneasy about. Russia stands out as the most important challenge, even though there is no clear consensus on this issue, given that there are partners of great specific weight (such as France and Germany) that defend the need to maintain an open dialogue that allows for the establishment of a form of non-belligerent coexistence to preserve the possibility of progress towards détente. This confrontation is accompanied by a nuclear facet, in which Europe is a stone's throw away from whatever Washington and Moscow may decide, but which seriously affects the security, even the survival, of the old continent. The same could be said of agreements on disarmament, missiles, etc., in which the Europeans follow US dictates.

On the other hand, China's growth has changed the global scene in such a way that its influence can be felt in the European framework, raising fears that its enormous geo-economic capacity could interfere in such a way as to undermine internal cohesion. Added to this possibility is the position of the US, an decisive partner in the alliance, which sees China not only in terms of an economic and technological competitor, etc., but much

more dangerously, as a potential military enemy. Misunderstood Atlantic solidarity could drag other allies into situations in which many of them may not wish to be involved.

Then there are new threats, ranging from new technologies, transnational organised crime, cyberspace, outer space, the consequences of climate change, the fragmentation of social cohesion, disinformation, terrorism, the growth of failed states in the European neighbourhood, and so on.

The conclusion is that no single state can ensure its survival on its own, but especially not the European states, which need their American 'big brother' as a true guarantor of their survival vis-à-vis the other great powers. This is especially clear in the field of the nuclear threat, where Washington's strategy has followed a dual track: forward deployment of nuclear forces in Europe to ensure deterrence, but at a sufficiently low level to avoid a security dilemma and the ensuing arms race.

But the organisation's challenge is not only the rapidly evolving security environment, it also needs to counter growing internal dissent. On the one hand is Turkey, which with its neo-Ottoman 'Blue Homeland' policy pursues a foreign policy diverging from general interests, even leading it to clash with other member states in the Eastern Mediterranean¹. Also the purchase of the Russian anti-aircraft system, which caused the US to deny it the sale of 5th generation F-35 fighter jets. As if this were not enough, a few months ago Ankara threatened to expel a number of Western diplomats. In recent months, however, Turkey has been trying to rebuild relations with neighbours such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel.

Meanwhile, opinions are divided regarding the relationship with Russia, separating the US (which ends up imposing its geostrategic criteria on the Alliance as a whole), the UK, the Baltics, Poland and Romania on the one hand, and France and Germany on the other. The latter argue that communication channels with Russia should remain open and do not see such an extreme and existential danger.

Thus, the cohesion of the alliance is suffering and far from diminishing, it seems to be increasing. In order to understand this, it is useful to go back to the moment before the approval of the 2010 strategic concept.

The (at the time of writing) still valid strategic concept is clearly obsolete, as it envisages a willingness to forge a real partnership with Russia to begin with, which today seems very difficult, if not impossible. China is not mentioned either, although it does not pose a military threat to Europe today. But another very important issue is that it does not provide any planning guidance. Indeed, the document is arguably the product of the European security order of the moment, characterised by the absence of a clear and direct threat to the alliance, but forced to confront a complex web of new security challenges. At that time

¹ France vs. Turkey in the East Med; JABBOUR, Jana; IFRI, 6 May 2021; available at https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/jabbour_france_vs_turkey_eastmed_2021.pdf, last accessed 20 January 2022.

most partners still perceived Russia as a potential and desirable strategic partner. Moreover, the dominant partner, the US, imposed a global orientation with a NATO prepared for crisis management, as it needed to involve the Europeans in Iraq and Afghanistan in order to reduce some of its heavy burden in the war on terror, invoking Article 5 of Washington's treaty after the 9/11 attacks.

The 2010 strategic concept is thus more of a policy document that does not clearly envisage any strategic priorities, maintaining a calculated ambiguity, contenting itself with identifying (with no hierarchy) three fundamental tasks: collective defence, crisis management and cooperative security. The same can be said of potential threats, risks and challenges, most of which are transnational and unconventional, for which the alliance is not equipped economically, legally or diplomatically. Moreover, the obstinacy of the Bush Jr. administration in dragging its European allies into the so-called 'war on terror' had already undermined internal cohesion. This lack of unity prevented the strategic concept from being adapted in 2001; it had to wait until 2010, when the wounds of the deep division caused by the second invasion of Iraq were partly healed.

An ambiguity that led to a lack of military guidance, but the events of 2008 (Russia's intervention in Georgia) and especially 2014 (rebellion in Donbas and Crimea's secession and incorporation into Russia) forced the military-political apparatus to react. Once it was clear that the alliance was facing a completely new security situation in Europe, it became apparent that both the military command structure (which had lost its geographic orientation) and military capabilities (primarily crisis-management oriented) were ill-equipped to deal with the situation and had lost the initiative.

In response, in May 2019 the Military Committee approved the document called 'MC 400/4', a new military strategy that represented a return to conventional warfare, after decades of counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency, recognising a new form of conflict: hybrid warfare. Russia represented the biggest threat alongside terrorism (still present as the US was still engaged in the war on terror). It was a clear step towards a reality that was being imposed by the facts, abandoning the previous path that put political interests—which some member states such as Germany wished to preserve to some extent—first.

Meanwhile, the alliance was not inactive. Successive summits in Wales (2014) and Warsaw (2016) eventually adopted the 'Readiness Action Plan'², which envisages immediate force deployments to reinforce the Baltic states and Poland (Forward Defence Posture), as well as measures aimed at longer-term changes to deter Russia. These initiatives, which clearly went beyond the current strategic concept, could have triggered the development of a new strategic concept, but the impediment that came with the arrival of the Trump administration drastically dried up the alliance's political flow due to the

² Readiness Action Plan, available at https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2015_12/20151130_1512-factsheet_rap_en.pdf, last accessed 20 January 2022.

administration's open hostility towards it, preventing any progress towards a new strategic roadmap. A new administration in the White House openly in favour of restoring the US global ally network has opened the door for a new strategic concept to become possible.

Thus, at the London Summit (December 2019), the NATO Council invited the NATO Secretary General to conduct a forward-looking reflection process to identify ways to strengthen NATO's political dimension. This mandate resulted in the document entitled 'NATO 2030: United for a new era'³, published on 25 November 2020. Subsequently, in February 2021, Secretary General Stoltenberg himself mentioned seven areas that should frame the new, renewed strategic concept, commenting on 'NATO 2030'⁴. The alliance is therefore in the process of developing a new strategic concept.

But the deep divisions remain in the background. On the one hand, member states that demand making collective defence against Russia a priority. Others prefer the aforementioned dual track, which keeps the door open to dialogue. Meanwhile, some believe that NATO should also pay attention to the southern flank, where threats are growing and multidimensional. We cannot forget the US, which wants an alliance with a more global focus, this time for its growing confrontation with China, not without disagreements with such a stance⁵. European partners risk accepting the unstated (but present) US offer to cooperate with Washington in its confrontation for global dominance with China, in exchange for its guarantee of security from Russia on the European stage.

In addition, there Turkey, an ally whose regime is drifting towards (if not already there) an autocracy far from the vaunted 'values that unite us' but also developing an assertive foreign policy, in some cases divergent and in others clearly opposed to the interests of some Alliance members⁶, which leads to serious disputes with other allies in Syria, Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean (mainly the US, France and Greece)⁷.

The question is whether this opportunity to renew the strategic concept will give way to the temptation of shaping a policy framework that is attractive to all and helps to bridge internal dissent, but is inadequate to meet today's strategic challenges, as was the case in 2010. Failure to strike the necessary balance between the two positions is likely to diminish NATO's ability to deal with growing regional geopolitical instability and to play a relevant role in the face of new threats.

³ Available at https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf, last accessed on 20 January 2020

⁴ NATO 2030; available at https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2021/6/pdf/2106-factsheet-nato2030-en.pdf, last accessed on 20 January 2021

⁵ Cercle de Reflection Interarmées (CRI), Il faut stopper ce train fou; available at <https://www.capital.fr/economie-politique/otan-2030-il-faut-stopper-ce-train-fou-avant-qu'il-ne-soit-trop-tard-1396756>, accessed on 20 January 2022. The CRI is an independent body comprised of retired general officers from the three armies, together with some civilians; it aims to inform public opinion and political decision-making levels.

⁶ PONTIJAS, José Luis; Consecuencias para Europa de la compleja relación ruso turca; available at https://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2021/DIEEEA32_2021_JOSPON_Consecuencias.pdf

⁷ SANCHEZ TAPIA, Felipe; Geopolítica del gas y militarización del Mediterráneo Oriental; available at https://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2019/DIEEEA05_2019FELIPE-Mediterraneo.pdf.

The next strategic concept should therefore place collective defence at the top of the priority list, but balanced with a greater focus and presence on the southern flank, while enhancing and encouraging internal politico-military dialogue, to increase and solidify alliance cohesion, avoiding an ambitious global approach and avoiding the risk of becoming a sounding board for Washington's global interests.

THE EUROPEAN UNION STRATEGIC COMPASS

Another major milestone in the EU's 2022 agenda is the so-called 'strategic compass', which aims to establish a common strategic vision for the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) for the next 5-10 years, which in turn contributes to creating a common European strategic culture⁸. All of this is expected to be the breeding ground for strengthening European unity and solidarity and, above all, boosting its capacity and political will to act together, protecting European interests and defending its values.

The strategic compass is an extension of the 2016 European strategy, which aims to set the level of ambition for the Union's security and defence agenda, establishing clear commitments to be achieved, within defined time limits and divided into four broad areas: action, security, investment and partnership.

'Action' aims to be capable of responding to any situation that may pose a threat to European security or international peace and stability in a rapid and robust manner. To this end, there is a desire to act with partners where possible, but also alone where this is not possible, a clear allusion to the lack of US interest in geographic scenarios where its interests are not at risk, but where European interests are. The aim is to strengthen CSDP civilian and military missions by providing it with a faster and more flexible decision-making capacity and by facilitating greater solidarity in the financing of operations. A rapid deployment capability (RDC) is also desired, based on flexible and interoperable modules of military units provided by the Member States that commit to it, capable of deploying some 5,000 troops (including strategic enablers) to deal with different types of crises. There is also a desire to strengthen command and control structures, both civilian (Civilian Planning and Conduct Capability) and military (Military Planning and Conduct Capability, a unit of the EU Military Staff).

In the area of 'security', the aim is to increase ability to anticipate threats, secure access to strategic domains and protect European citizens. Intelligence capabilities will be increased to achieve this, making it possible to monitor developments in geographical scenarios considered to be of interest, as well as to establish strategic foresight. A so-called 'EU Hybrid Toolbox' is also to be created, bringing together the different instruments already in place to detect and respond to the broad spectrum of hybrid threats, especially disinformation and interference from outside the Union. Cyber defence

⁸ PONTIJAS CALDERÓN, José Luis; La brújula estratégica de la Unión Europea; available at https://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2021/DIEEEA45_2021_JOSPON_Brujula.pdf.

will receive special attention, along with open access in the maritime domain and attention to outer space.

With regard to 'investment', the idea is to acquire the necessary skills to act autonomously, reducing technological and industrial dependencies, with a special focus on the so-called 'strategic enablers'.

'Partnership' seeks to strengthen and increase cooperation with leading international institutions (NATO, UN, OSCE, African Union and ASEAN), as well as with third states with which there is already a fluid relationship of cooperation, or with those that wish to do so on a case-by-case basis. The Union wants to practice, promote and defend multilateralism respectful of international legality by strengthening and establishing multilateral and bilateral relations. Special attention will be given to partners such as the UK (with which a global cooperation agreement is sought), the US, Norway and Canada, but also areas such as the Western Balkans, Africa, Asia and Latin America. A new proposal appears to be the creation of a security and defence partnership forum to discuss and work with partners on common challenges and threats.

Broadly speaking, this is the plan that the strategic compass envisages to strengthen the CSDP in the 2030 horizon, in which the Union wants to play a greater role in its own security, as well as at global level. Of course, the latter is confronted with the 'provincial' view of some member states and this is precisely their Achilles heel, namely the political will of the member states, or rather the lack of it.

A paradigmatic example of this is the new initiative to put in place the aforementioned rapid deployment capability of 5,000 troops (a military rapid reaction force). Another similar and much less ambitious initiative has been in place since 2007, the 'Battle Groups', capable of deploying up to 1,500 troops in 15 days. They have never been used, despite opportunities to do so, due to the lack of political will of member states to employ such a crisis management tool. This is the main problem facing the CSDP as a whole. Will there be anything in the strategic compass to encourage and secure such political will? Unfortunately, experience shows that in the CSDP, what depends on the Commission moves forward relatively smoothly, while what depends on the Council (i.e. on the will of the 27 to agree) suffers from an almost paralysing lethargy. Thus, despite high expectations generated by the strategic compass, it remains to be seen how the 27 will react to its proposals, especially in the field of operational deployment for crisis management.

A NEW JOINT NATO-EU DECLARATION

"The Organisation does not like this idea. You know what the Organisation expects of you."

This is the message NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg sent to selected European capitals, members of both the alliance and the Union, about the EU's plans to

create a rapidly deployable military capability⁹. Some EU partners frown upon any initiative that might detract from NATO's strength or prominence (led by Poland, which seems to have picked up the baton from the UK). We should therefore ask ourselves, if this is the attitude at the top of the Atlantic alliance and in some of the member states of both organisations, what can we expect from a third EU-NATO joint declaration?

The two previous declarations, in 2016 and 2018, have managed to agree on 74 areas of cooperation, divided into 7 major thematic groupings: hybrid threats, military operational cooperation, cybersecurity, defence capabilities, defence industry and research, training exercises, rebuilding capabilities in third partner states and strengthening the political dialogue between the two organisations.



Data: EEAS, 2019

But the friendly and sweetened official statements from both sides fail to conceal a reality far from the official version: contact is made at an informal and informative level, which prevents any meaningful agreement or cooperation. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, the institutional blockade to which Turkey subjects any cooperation with the EU, for reasons that are not the subject of our study and which are counterbalanced by Greece and Cyprus. Also the institutional jealousy and mutual distrust of both administrative apparatuses, which is not surprising since the EU is an international legal actor, while NATO is a tool (focused on deterrence and collective defence) with no diplomatic capacity for foreign policy; the issues that dominate the European agenda have

⁹ BISCOP, Sven; Common Biden, let's talk!; Egmon Institute, 13 October 2021; available at <https://www.egmoninstitute.be/40384-2/>, last accessed 20 January 2022.

little to do with those that dominate the alliance's; Brussels decides collectively while in NATO, the real decision-maker is Washington and the rest agree (consultations take place and proposals are accepted, but without US acquiescence they are cut short); EU member states prefer to act alone or in ad-hoc coalitions for high/medium intensity operations (including France), given Europe's restrictive legal framework.

But the factor that weighs most heavily in the lack of mutual understanding is US reluctance. In the current multipolar scenario, European and American interests and priorities are progressively diverging, although there are still and will continue to be important and fundamental common interests, such as to pretend that there is only one vision in the European security scenario, that of the Atlantic alliance (ergo of Washington). This forces the EU to be a geopolitical and geostrategic actor, but this does not mean that it should separate from the US. Perhaps the solution would be to create an EU bloc within NATO itself (the famous European pillar), which would allow for a substantial move towards European strategic military autonomy, while remaining in tune with the interests of the vital US ally. After all, the alliance was created by the Americans so that Europe would be able to stand on its own two feet and Washington could focus on its own strategic concerns.

Does the US really want to have this conversation? Following the AUKUS announcement, President Biden recognised "... *the importance of a stronger and more capable European defense, that contributes positively to transatlantic and global security and is complementary to NATO*¹⁰". But it is not the first time that the US administration has made similar statements, only to backtrack on European initiatives when it believes they threaten US leadership or the interests of its arms industry.

The opportunity is in front of us right now because both organisations are simultaneously developing the strategic concept and the strategic compass respectively, so there should be close coordination between the two, avoiding mismatches and laying a solid foundation for close cooperation. Moreover, the parallels between the two initiatives are obvious. To begin with, the strategic environment is the same, after all, European security should be perceived as indivisible, regardless of the framework in which states cooperate, NATO or EU. But it is perhaps here that the differences between the different interpretations lie, as the perception of threat differs according to the geographical location, history and particular characteristics of each nation. In the case of the Atlantic alliance, the perspective is more homogeneous due to the vision imposed by Washington, but even so, there are discrepancies.

Some analysts advocate a division of roles between the two organisations, whereby the alliance would be in charge of collective defence (including new areas such as

¹⁰ SANCHEZ TAPIA, Salvador; AUKUS la alianza que abiertamente militariza la relación con China; available at <https://www.unav.edu/web/global-affairs/aukus-la-alianza-que-abiertamente-militariza-la-relacion-con-china>; last accessed on 15 January 2020

cyberspace and outer space) while the Union would be in charge of crisis management in the European geostrategic environment. This debate, however, has so far not been substantiated at political level, even though it would merit analysis at these levels (whether geographically, functionally or both).

In any case, strengthening, deepening and improving NATO-EU relations and cooperation should figure prominently both in the new alliance strategy and in the Union's strategic compass, for which the new joint declaration should set out the lines of progression and the level of ambition. But the mutual Greek-Turkish blockade, coupled with US reticence on the alliance side and the administration's reticence on the EU side, suggest that, apart from the grandiloquent and sweetened language of official statements, very little practical progress will be made. The new format of EU-US relations might be one way to try to circumvent such obstacles, but even so, it does not appear to be a solution that can provide predictable, let alone decisive, results. Once again, the new joint declaration risks being largely inoperative.

CONCLUSIONS

Both NATO and the EU are engaged in strategic developments of great strategic significance. In addition, the Atlantic alliance must appoint a new secretary general and the two organisations want to issue a new joint statement. All of this is expected to take place in the first half of 2022.

NATO will update its strategic concept, in which Russia will no longer be seen as a desirable partner but as a real threat, despite internal disagreements over maintaining a dialogue to enable future détente. Part of the Russian issue is the nuclear facet, in which Europe plays the role of being a stone's throw between Washington and Moscow. In light of this, European partners should orchestrate a relationship with Moscow that establishes a form of non-belligerent coexistence.

Absent in the previous concept, China will emerge as another prominent actor, although its threat is more economic than military for the old continent. European partners must try to avoid being forced by Washington's influence to take sides in the growing Sino-US confrontation.

We cannot forget the new panoply of emerging threats and risks, for which the North Atlantic alliance is neither designed nor adequately equipped. All of this could lead to a document in which misunderstood Atlantic solidarity could drag Europeans into situations and scenarios where their fundamental interests are not at stake.

Finally, there is the growing internal dissent due to Turkey's geostrategic drift, the relationship with Russia and the lack of attention to the southern flank. The new strategic concept should strike the right balance between political commitment, preserving cohesion, and the need to adapt to the new geostrategic environment. To this end, a proper prioritisation between collective defence and crisis management should be an

acceptable framework for all, avoiding an ambitious global approach. In any case, the alliance should avoid becoming a sounding board for Washington's geostrategic interests.

For its part, the EU wants to equip itself with a so-called 'strategic compass' to drive the CSDP forward over the next 5-10 years, helping to create a common European strategic culture, boosting its capacity to act as well as its political will. This development includes the creation of a rapid deployment crisis management capability of some 5,000 troops to replace the 'battle groups', which have never been used since their creation.

But there is still a lack of political will for the CSDP and it remains to be seen whether the new document will succeed in encouraging it, or whether it will fail, as has happened with previous initiatives not least because of a lack of agreement on prioritising threats.

Finally, the new joint declaration should serve to relaunch relations between the two organisations with practical results but, political declarations aside, the same structural difficulties and reticence that have prevented satisfactory results with the previous two could again weigh it down and condemn it to inoperability.

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