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Fostering Europe's Strategic Autonomy

Security and Defence Policy: Time to Deliver

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Executive summary

In an increasingly competitive and uncertain international context, Europe cannot indefinitely outsource its security. Europeans should be able to carry out a larger range of tasks on their own, while working with the US and other allies and partners whenever possible. Cooperation at EU level is not the only way to strengthen Europe's assets and resolve in security and defence matters, but it can and should play a bigger and decisive role. To be a more effective security provider and a viable partner, Europe needs to become more strategic and more autonomous. Advancing strategic autonomy in this domain is an uphill struggle. European countries have different strategic cultures and major shortfalls in military capabilities. Strengthening solidarity within the EU and delivering tangible assets to cope with a wide range of threats are the twin tracks for progress towards a more strategic and autonomous Europe.

This paper argues that the EU should brace, empower and engage. Bracing entails developing a common strategic culture and building up Europe's resilience against old and new challenges. Europeans need to define what they want to be able to do together, through which capabilities and to counter which threats. Empowering requires enhancing cooperation to deliver the capabilities that Europeans need to carry out more demanding military tasks, and to achieve the operational capacity to do so. Improving coherence between the instruments for defence cooperation recently established at EU level, and a stronger engagement from member states, will be critical to make concrete progress.

A more capable and determined EU should engage with allies and other partners at different levels of cooperation. Advancing European strategic autonomy reinforces the Transatlantic partnership, as it contributes to a more mature dialogue with the US and to a better sharing of responsibilities. The EU and NATO should deepen cooperation and coordination on

cybersecurity and countering hybrid threats, capability development and military mobility. Close cooperation across the full breadth of the security agenda is in the mutual interest of the EU and the UK. The EU should also work more effectively with a range of partners on capacity-building and on strengthening their resilience.

The initiative launched by EU defence ministers in June 2020 to develop a 'Strategic Compass' to guide EU efforts in security and defence can make an important contribution. The ongoing analysis of the threats and challenges facing Europe should pave the way to better define shared priorities and requirements to implement EU goals in security and defence. Aligning means and ends is the core of any strategy. A more strategic Europe would be able to play a bigger role as a security provider, whether in cooperation with others or, if necessary, on its own.

Progress towards a more self-reliant Europe in security and defence is part of a larger agenda. Advancing strategic autonomy calls for a broad approach, including trade and investment policies, completing the Single Market and technology and innovation. In fact, these dimensions are intertwined: promoting Europe's security, prosperity and stability depends on moving forward across the board, mobilising the full EU toolbox.

Introduction

A more challenging threat environment

The European Union is confronted with an increasingly challenging threat environment. In the east, Russia has violated the sovereignty and territorial integrity of several of its neighbouring countries, seriously breaching the international norms underpinning the European security order. In the south, unrest resulting from state failure and conflict has spread and threatens Europe's security. While defence budgets have been rising across the world, some crucial arms control treaties contributing to European security (such as the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty) have crumbled. Moreover, despite repeated calls for the respect of a rules-based order in cyberspace, cyber-attacks are proliferating, challenging the EU's security and economic competitiveness. Global powers such as China have become more assertive, while the United States has become less predictable, disengaging from multilateralism and focusing increasingly on China and the Pacific.

The coronavirus crisis carries far-reaching implications for security affairs at large, and Europe's security in particular. The pandemic has sharpened the rivalry between the US and China, sparked a surge of disinformation, and exacerbated the fragility of several countries surrounding Europe, with potentially destabilising implications. It has also exposed the limits of Europe's internal crisis management mechanisms, while its economic impact will likely reduce the resources available to enhance Europe's security and defence.

These developments make the European security environment more complex and volatile and test Europe's ability to respond to it. In this context, the call in the June 2016 EU Global Strategy (EUGS) for the EU to foster its strategic autonomy in the security and defence domain is even more relevant today. Even though the concept of strategic autonomy was used eight times in the EUGS, the strategy did not offer a definition of the term. In the subsequent 2016 Implementation Plan on Security and Defence (IPSD), EU's strategic autonomy was described as "the ability to act and cooperate with international and regional partners wherever possible, while being able to operate autonomously when and where necessary." In November 2016, the EU Council set out a new EU level of ambition for the EU as a security and defence actor in three areas: (i) responding to external conflicts and crises, (ii) building up the capacities of partners, and (iii) protecting the EU and its citizens.

Since then, the debate on strategic autonomy in defence and security matters has evolved, pointing to key requirements at the political, operational, and industrial levels.¹ **If there is a growing consensus that Europe should take more responsibility for its own security, however, advancing strategic autonomy in this domain remains a distant goal.** For one, research shows that the EU member states are both unclear and divided about the meaning and the importance of achieving European strategic autonomy.² In addition, as the EU's level of ambition has expanded in scope, including, for example, the protection of the EU and its citizens, Europe's military capabilities have continued to shrink.

¹ Ronja Kempin and Barbara Kunz, [France, Germany, and the Quest for European Strategic Autonomy: Franco-German Defence Cooperation in A New Era](#), *Notes du Cerfa*, No. 141, Ifri, December 2017.

² Ulrike Franke and Tara Varma, [Independence Play: Europe's Pursuit of Strategic Autonomy](#), European Council on Foreign Relations, July 2019.

National reflexes continue to prevail concerning the defence priorities of EU member states. This owes in part to their different strategic cultures and hampers efforts to make defence cooperation the norm for capability development, as the EUGS called for. When cooperation does take place, it still lacks a shared sense of purpose concerning which military tasks the Europeans should be able to carry out on their own, if need be, and related operational requirements. There is a risk that Europe's capability-expectations gap will further widen, with objectives and requirements expanding faster than available assets.

In a much more competitive and uncertain strategic context, however, Europe cannot indefinitely outsource its security and should become a stronger security and defence partner to the US. **Cooperation at EU level is not the only vector to strengthen Europe's assets and resolve in security and defence matters but can and should play a bigger and decisive role to that effect.** While arrangements such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF) have not yet produced substantial results, their proper implementation will be critical to deliver the capabilities and operational capacity that Europe needs. By establishing these mechanisms, EU member states have taken steps in the right direction, but the road is still long. The solution is not to go off-track, but to move forward.

Pursuing Europe's strategic autonomy in the field of defence and security takes realism and ambition. Realism suggests that Europe should be able to provide for its security, that of neighbouring regions and that of the global commons (such as oceans

and space) to a much larger degree than is currently the case. Ambition, if backed up by progress to develop adequate assets, is a necessary political ingredient to translate resources into results. That is, actions that advance Europe's security, such as carrying out robust crisis management operations, patrolling the seas or securing Europe's digital infrastructure. In short, the fact that advancing strategic autonomy in this domain is an uphill struggle for Europe should not preclude concrete steps to enhance the EU's capacity to operate autonomously and strategically – a choice that reconciles realism and ambition.

This paper argues that the EU should brace, empower, and engage.³ Brace means strengthening Europe's cohesion, solidarity, and resilience against a growing range of threats and challenges, and geopolitical competition at large. Empower refers to equipping the EU with the tools and resources necessary to make it a stronger security provider. Engage means making a stronger Europe a stronger partner to cooperate with others, whenever possible, to uphold security and stability in Europe and beyond.

Brace

Towards a more cohesive and resilient European Union

Political cohesion and a shared strategic culture feed off each other. Progress towards a shared strategic culture, by working on a common assessment of the threat landscape and of resulting priorities for European defence and security, is an essential ingredient of political cohesion at the EU level. The latter is a precondition for EU member states to jointly take more

³ Giovanni Grevi, [Europe's path to strategic recovery: Brace, empower and engage](#), EPC Discussion Paper, April 2020.

responsibility for their security and perform more demanding military tasks. At the same time, faced with hybrid threats that span various interconnected sectors (such as technology, information, and the military), the EU needs to upgrade the protection of its citizens, societies, and critical assets and engage all stakeholders through a preventive approach to resilience.

Cohesion and strategic culture: mapping threats to target priorities

Advancing towards a more strategically autonomous European Union requires political cohesion and solidarity. Political cohesion is about mutual trust and a sense of common purpose. The roots of political cohesion within the EU stretch, of course, well beyond security affairs, including multiple political, economic, and social factors. In the security domain, the progressive convergence among the strategic cultures of EU member states is at the same time a driver and a product of political cohesion. To be sure, bridging differences between national strategic cultures is a long-term undertaking, as they are deeply rooted in respective historical and political experiences. The issue, however, is not to produce an artificially homogeneous strategic culture by committee. It is rather to foster a common vision where respective priorities are understood not as competing but as multiple dimensions of a complex security environment, which concerns all EU members and requires cooperation. In short, **Europeans need to better define what they want to be able to do together, through which capabilities, and to counter which threats.**

The ongoing Strategic Compass process, launched by the Council of the European Union in June 2020, can make an important contribution to address these basic questions. The initiative aims to “enhance and guide the implementation of the Level of Ambition agreed in November 2016 in the context of the EU Global Strategy and could further contribute to develop the common European security and defence culture.”⁴ The process is, therefore, meant to provide political direction for EU security and defence policy, building on the EU Global Strategy.⁵

The first step implies a “360-degree analysis of the full range of threats and challenges” that the EU is facing, to be presented by the High Representative by the end of 2020. The conclusions of the June 2020 Council of the EU envisage that, on the basis of this threat analysis, “the Strategic Compass will define policy orientations and specific goals” in four key areas, namely crisis management, resilience, capability development, and partnerships. It is envisaged that the Council of the EU adopts the Strategic Compass in 2022.

The Strategic Compass process will face the challenge, common to earlier strategic processes at the EU level (and in other institutional settings), to reconcile inclusiveness and focus. Ensuring the buy-in of EU member states will be crucial but, as a first step, a ‘Christmas tree’ document simply outlining all the threats and challenges currently confronting the EU would not bring much added value. This mapping should be mobilised to generate a better appreciation of respective national priorities, further define common ones, and outline requirements to meet them.

⁴ EU Council, [Council Conclusions on Security and Defence](#), 17 June 2020, doc. no 8792/20.

⁵ Daniel Fiott, [Uncharted territory? Towards a common threat analysis and a Strategic Compass for EU security and defence](#), EUISS Brief 16, July 2020;

The envisaged analysis can help by scrutinising the links between different threats and how these result in new vulnerabilities and requirements for action. Examples include the implications of the digitalisation of critical infrastructures (including defence infrastructures), the risks threatening the multiple flows – from energy to data – which Europe depends on, or the impact of the involvement of competing powers in conflict areas surrounding the EU. The potentially destabilising effects of threat multipliers like climate change and health emergencies should be included in this analysis. The exercise should also focus on the evolution of the threat landscape in the long term, not least concerning the impact of new technologies, to inform decisions on joint investments. This would enable better targeting the development of the capabilities that will matter in the future through the European Defence Fund (EDF) and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). A mapping of this sort could provide a useful input to the subsequent stages of the Strategic Compass, expected to drive forward the implementation of the EU's level of ambition in security and defence.

Protection and resilience: securing Europe

Drawing on the EUGS, in November 2016 the Council of the EU expanded the scope of the EU level of ambition in security and defence to protecting the EU and its citizens. The EU's contribution to this goal covers a wide range of policies and tasks and is a key benchmark for progress towards strategic autonomy. Delivering added value requires

coordination between the tools and resources available under different EU policies, from security and defence to counterterrorism and the protection of critical infrastructure. **Security against external, hybrid or cyber threats is a precondition for healthy politics, solidarity within and between member states, economic growth, and technological innovation – all pillars of a more autonomous and sovereign Europe.**⁶

The EU has limited powers in matters related to EU security. Aside from the fact that EU member states are chiefly responsible for their own security, the role of NATO as the foundation of collective defence for its members is not questioned by Europeans. However, given the evolution of Europe's threat environment, with most challenges cutting across boundaries and policy sectors, it is critical that the EU strengthens its contribution to Europe's security across the board. The EU can serve as a unique hub connecting and multiplying the efforts of a wide range of actors – public and private – at multiple levels. In doing so, the EU can operate in various ways, such as defining common objectives and benchmarks to secure digital infrastructure like 5G, strengthening the coordination between police and intelligence services or establishing a 'surge' capacity, with specialised teams backing up national services in case of severe crises, from cyberattacks to health emergencies.

Enhancing internal resilience, understood as the ability to withstand, adapt, and quickly recover from stresses and shocks, is a core dimension of the EU's contribution to protecting the EU. At

⁶ As the recent EU Security Union Strategy put it: "Security is not only the basis for personal safety, it also protects fundamental rights and provides the foundation for confidence and dynamism in our economy, our society and our democracy." See

European Commission, Communication on the [EU Security Union Strategy](#), COM(2020) 605 final, 24 July 2020.

the outset of the current COVID-19 pandemic, whereas EU crisis management tools such as the Integrated Political Crisis Response (IPCR) mechanism were activated fairly early, the member states at first retreated behind national borders and started taking uncoordinated decisions. While EU member states continue to battle the COVID-19 pandemic and have enhanced their cooperation in several ways, the lessons of the early phases of the crisis should feed into an upgrading of the EU's internal crisis management and civil protection mechanisms. That includes further reflection on the role of the military in supporting civil protection responses, as foreseen under Article 222 TFEU.

Turning to the protection of critical infrastructure, the digitalisation of all aspects of life in an increasingly competitive strategic context entails that external actors do not shy away from using hybrid or malicious cyber tools to influence or weaken European societies. The EU has been working for several years on increasing cyber resilience in Europe. However, with this challenge likely to intensify in the foreseeable future, **more will need to be done in terms of strengthening the protection of digital data and systems from cyberattacks, quickly resuming business operations or service delivery in case of a successful attack and deterring cyberattacks.** While the new Cybersecurity Strategy (envisaged as part of the large recovery package presented by the Commission in May 2020) alongside the review of the Directive on the security of network and information systems (NIS) have the potential to strengthen EU's cyber resilience, collective

responses to cyberattacks originating from outside the EU will be necessary to reinforce the EU's deterrence posture.

This could be done through a more systematic and full use of the diplomatic tools in the new EU Cyber Diplomacy Toolbox. The first EU sanctions imposed through this framework in the summer of 2020 against Russian, Chinese, and North-Korean individuals and entities involved in past cyber-attacks⁷ are an encouraging signal in this direction. **Europe's cybersecurity would be further improved by increased cooperation between the EU and NATO** – one that goes beyond dialogue at the staff level and holding parallel exercises. This could mean common training of staff, the organisation of joint exercises and further steps to improve information exchange, including cyber threat intelligence and other confidential information.⁸

Advancing the EU's contribution to the protection of the Union also encompasses the implementation of the EU Treaties' mutual assistance (Article 42.7 TEU) and solidarity (Article 222 TFEU) clauses. In June 2019, the Council of the EU asked that the member states draw the lessons learned from the first invocation of Article 42.7 (by France after the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris) and study the possible implications of Article 222. In June 2020, defence ministers agreed to continue to carry out table top exercises and scenario-based discussions, with a focus on how to implement the mutual assistance clause, including scenarios relevant to the solidarity clause.⁹ The potential implications of the EU mutual assistance clause for Europe's defence are

⁷ EU Council, [EU imposes the first ever sanctions against cyber-attacks](#), 30 July 2020.

⁸ Bruno L  t  , "Cooperation in cyberspace" in Gustav Lindstrom and Thierry Tardy (eds.), *The EU and NATO. The Essential Partners*, August 2019.

⁹ A scenario-exercise which involved the political directors of European defence ministries in the first part of 2019 was a first step. See Martin Quencez, Sophia Besch, [The Challenges Ahead for EU Defense Cooperation](#), Policy Brief, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 22 January, 2020.

controversial, since NATO remains the foundation of the collective defence of its members. However, the scope of Article 42.7 is broader than defending Europe from conventional attacks and its activation does not necessarily require a military response (while not excluding it either). The practical agenda outlined by the June 2020 Council of the EU seems suitable to develop a shared understanding of what can or cannot be done within the EU to respond to various crisis scenarios, through what assets and what decision-making processes.

Empower

Achieving a real operational capacity

Empower means fully leveraging the potential of cooperation among EU member states to scale up both their capabilities and operational capacity, matching the political level of ambition set by the Council of the EU. The focus should not be on carving out new institutional frameworks but on mobilising those recently established to deliver much-needed assets in cost-effective ways, and on providing more incentives to encourage member states to deploy together through CSDP operations.

Capability development: from process to delivery

Europeans lack the military capabilities they need to fulfil the level of ambition they have set for themselves. Over the last 20 years, the gap between their aims and their assets has expanded, due to several factors. Investment in defence has declined in most member states (until recently), while investment decisions are

made in an uncoordinated fashion, which leads to a waste of resources, duplication, and suboptimal output.

While defence spending has been on the rise in Europe since 2014, it has only recently reached the level prior to the 2008 financial crisis, after suffering steep cuts amounting to about 11% of overall expenditure between 2007 and 2013. Research shows that, since 1999, the armed forces of EU member states have lost between 30% and 80% of their capabilities, depending on different categories of armaments, and that EU member states can count on only one third of the assets they need to fulfil their own level of ambition in a scenario of multiple concurrent crisis management operations.¹⁰

Two additional factors underscore that the status quo is unsustainable. For one, as noted above, the deterioration of Europe's strategic context points to rising pressure on Europeans to cater for their security, in cooperation with others or on their own. For another, the application of new technologies to future weapon systems entails that their costs will climb, making them barely affordable for individual member states and requiring collaborative approaches to pool resources and avoid dependency on third parties for key technologies with military applications.¹¹

The EU is not the only framework through which member states can join forces to develop and acquire new capabilities. However, the combination of a range of cooperative arrangements established in the last few years has the potential to empower member states. That said, **converting statements and processes into outcomes will require a more**

¹⁰ Sophia Becker et al., [Deterrence and Defence in Times of COVID-19](#), DGAP Policy Brief 9, April 2020; Douglas Barrie et al., [Protecting Europe: Meeting the EU's Military Level of Ambition in the Context of Brexit](#), IISS and DGAP, November 2018.

¹¹ Daniel Fiott, [Strategic Investment. Making Geopolitical sense of the EU's defence industrial policy](#), Chaillot Paper 156, EU Institute for Security Studies, December 2019.

decisive political drive, renewed focus to ensure coherence between different mechanisms and adequate prioritisation to achieve a much stronger joint operational capacity.

Building on the EUGS, the political level of ambition set by the Council of the EU in November 2016 paved the way for a new review of EU military capabilities and priorities.¹² This review cycle took place in 2017-2019, through the 'Requirements Catalogue', the 'Force Catalogue', and the 'Progress Catalogue' – three successive steps under the Capability Development Mechanism (CDM). This exercise consisted of outlining illustrative scenarios, further defining the military tasks relevant to implementing the level of ambition and measuring the gap between the EU's stated military objectives and member states' capabilities. This assessment was followed in March 2019 by the identification of the so-called High Impact Capability Goals (HICGs), designed to address the EU's most pressing capability shortfalls in the short and medium term. The scrutiny of the EU's military shortcomings and the identification of HICGs are supposed to inform the Capability Development Plan (CDP), which aims to identify gaps and priorities for capability development in 11 capability areas. A revised CDP was adopted in June 2018.

The capability review and priority-setting process that followed the EUGS featured significant innovations. For one, the illustrative scenarios drafted under the CDM included military tasks related to the broader scope of the 2016 EU level of ambition, notably the protection of the EU and its citizens. For another, the review of national capabilities encompassed all of them, and not just those related to crisis

management operations under the CSDP, as was previously the case. Additionally, the pilot phase of the new Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) process was launched alongside the revision of the CDP. The CARD is intended to engage member states through a structured process aimed at delivering an overview of their defence expenditure, planning priorities, and current and future investment decisions. In turn, that should help to identify both the gaps and areas of convergence, contributing to the definition of priorities for collaborative capability development. However, the timing was unfortunate, since the revision of the CDP was completed before the finalisation of the trial run of the CARD.

In parallel to this process, two unprecedented initiatives designed to boost cooperative research and capability development efforts, as well as the coordination of national defence planning, have been launched since 2017 – the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF).

Through PESCO, EU member states set out to join forces on concrete projects for developing specific capabilities and a stronger operational capacity. On 13 November 2017, member states signed a common PESCO notification, which set a list of 20 binding commitments in the areas of defence investment, capability development and operational readiness. A total of 47 PESCO projects, mostly focused on capability development, have been approved between March 2018 and November 2019.

The purpose of the EDF, first proposed by the Commission in late 2016, is to strengthen the competitiveness of the European defence industry and to help

¹² Daniel Fiott, [EU defence capability development. Plans, priorities, projects](#), EUISS Brief 6, EU Institute for Security Studies, June 2018.

provide the EU member states with the military capabilities that they need to fulfil their stated collective level of ambition. The Fund aims to incentivise cooperation in defence research, and to de-risk cross-border capability development, thereby contributing to strengthen the so-called European Defence Technology and Industrial Base (EDTIB). The EDF is also supposed to make member states' defence research investment more efficient, through the funding of disruptive technologies, progress towards standardisation and interoperability and linkages to EU activities in non-military areas such as AI. Back in 2018, the Commission proposed to allocate €13.5 billion to the EDF under the 2021-2027 EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). During the negotiations on the future EU budget, successive proposals envisaged drastic cuts, down to €6 billion. Eventually, the agreement reached at the EU summit on 17-21 July 2020 sets the amount of the Fund at €7 billion. This cut implies that priorities and investment under the EDF will have to be carefully targeted towards key projects delivering concrete added value in terms of technological innovation and required military capabilities.

The crowded landscape of EU capability development processes and initiatives is yet to develop into an effective ecosystem, delivering concrete output on an adequate scale. Various sets of problems need to be tackled if Europe is to take on more responsibilities in security matters and make progress towards strategic autonomy. First of all, **member states need to show real ownership of these mechanisms**, factoring them into national defence planning cycles, engaging into structured consultation on respective priorities, taking steps to meet their binding

commitments under the PESCO framework and joining forces through major capability development initiatives, which can make a difference both to Europe's operational capacity and to strengthening its defence industrial base. At the same time, **as national capitals face the economic impact of the COVID 19 pandemic, which will put defence budgets under strain, member states should avoid uncoordinated defence cuts that would undermine both capabilities and mutual trust. Instead, they should seize this moment to prioritise key projects in a context of limited resources.**¹³

A stronger level of engagement from member states will be essential to give purpose to institutional processes, provide a clearer sense of priority to guide capability development and ensure coherence among different mechanisms. This clearly applies to PESCO.¹⁴ Since the decision on the first round of PESCO projects more than two years ago, various problems have emerged which cast doubt on PESCO's ability to deliver substantial output. Member states are lagging in meeting the commitments and targets that they have signed up to and most projects remain in a preparatory phase. Moreover, the link between some of the PESCO projects, key EU capability requirements and the EU's ambition to become more strategic and more autonomous is not always clear. The current strategic review of PESCO marks a crucial stage to inform the development of the second phase of the initiative, up to 2025. Member states need to speed up progress towards implementing their binding commitments, decide what core projects should drive the development of PESCO, enhance synergies across projects and share adequate information on their progress,

¹³ Backer et al. (2020), op. cit.

¹⁴ Sven Biscop, [European Defence and PESCO: Don't Waste the Chance](#), EU IDEA Policy Paper No 1, May 2020.

making PESCO an instrument for reaching common EU goals and not just narrow national ones.

One of the main challenges for the EU defence agenda will be ensuring the coherence of multiple EU defence initiatives and parallel processes. For example, **there is a need to align the ongoing first full CARD cycle, due to be completed by early 2021, to the selection of critical areas for capability development within PESCO.** It will be essential that PESCO and the EDF are mutually reinforcing to deliver added value, building on the current experience of the European defence industrial development programme (EDIDP). The fact that nine of the 16 pan-European defence industrial projects financed under EDIDP are related to PESCO projects is encouraging¹⁵.

There is also a need to improve the focus of the CDP, which is supposed to outline the priorities that PESCO and the EDF should help deliver. The CDP has been regarded as too broad and lacking focus on delivering capabilities to enhance operational effectiveness. The Strategic Context Cases (SCC) adopted by the European Defence Agency (EDA) in June 2019, which are meant to provide options for cooperation among member states to address capability shortfalls across the 11 priority areas of the CDP, seek to strengthen the link between setting priorities and implementing them.¹⁶ However, while the NATO's Defence Planning Process (NDPP) sets individual targets for the member countries, the CDP only sets overall EU objectives and focuses on avenues for collaborative projects.¹⁷ **The link between the CDP and national defence planning must be strengthened -**

the CARD process is supposed to help to that effect.

Coherence should also be ensured with NATO, which remains the primary institution for collective defence in Europe. The EU's defence planning process, which now covers a larger spectrum of national capabilities compared to the exclusive crisis management focus of the past, has been revised to ensure more coherence with the NDPP. By harmonising methods to collect data and considering NATO's capability requirements, **the EU defence planning cycle can contribute to match NATO priorities through collaborative efforts among EU member states. This would demonstrate that the EU's contribution to Europe's strategic autonomy, fostering Europe's capabilities and strengthening its defence industrial base, also strengthens NATO and the transatlantic partnership.**

This view is contested. The US has looked with suspicion to the establishment of new EU defence initiatives, notably on the grounds that they could detract from NATO and would amount to protectionist measures excluding third countries from collaborative defence projects among EU member states.¹⁸ While political considerations and national preferences have always been central to the functioning of defence markets on either side of the Atlantic, the basic question is what the objective is. **If the priority is to have Europeans take a larger share of the burden for their security and spend more in a context of financial constraints, then it is only reasonable that they would seek to do so, to a larger**

¹⁵ European Commission, [European Defence Fund: €205 million to boost the EU's strategic autonomy and industrial competitiveness](#), 15 June 2020.

¹⁶ European Defence Agency, [Strategic Context Cases approved for implementation of EU Capability Development Priorities](#), 27 June 2019.

¹⁷ NATO, [NATO Defence Planning Process](#), 28 June 2018; Biscop (2020), op. cit.

¹⁸ For an overview of the debate in the US, see Erik Brattberg and Tomáš Valášek, [EU Defence Cooperation: Progress Amid Transatlantic Concerns](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 2019.

extent, through the capabilities that they produce. Alternatively, they would progressively lose the industrial and technological capacity to provide for their security. Besides, if the new arrangements create frameworks and incentives for EU countries to join forces, member states remain free to choose any format to develop and procure their capabilities, and third country entities can join projects under PESCO and the EDF under certain conditions.

Member states' different approaches to arms exports are another challenge to collaborative capability development. While the EU has an arms export policy – the 2008 Common Position on arms export controls, which is legally binding¹⁹ – it lacks a mechanism to enforce it. In practice, EU member states largely define their arms export policies and they have often disagreed regarding arms exports to certain countries, the case of Saudi Arabia in 2018 being a recent example. These differences, however, can discourage member states from entering collaborative projects, since they may not be confident that their partners would continue to authorise the export of jointly produced items to individual countries. Progress should be made at the EU and national level, including clarifying the provisions of the Common Position and pursuing agreements among EU member states that comply with EU criteria, in order to better align their arms export policies and make the EU arms export regime more reliable and consistent.²⁰

Operational dimension: tasks, requirements and force packages

Generating adequate capabilities is not enough to produce real operational capacity. That requires joining up national capabilities through force packages that are readily deployable, sustainable, and robust enough to carry out a wide range of operations, including at the high-end of the spectrum. Europe needs to become a more viable security provider and build a much stronger crisis management capacity to contribute to stability in an often-turbulent neighbourhood and beyond.

The litmus test for Europe's progress towards strategic autonomy in operational terms consists, therefore, of the capacity of Europeans to carry out more demanding military tasks, fulfilling the EU's level of ambition. This continues to be a major challenge, given both the lack of sufficient clarity on what operations the EU should be able to carry out, and on what scale, and member states' reluctance to contribute to integrated forces packages at EU level. Since 1999, successive headline goals establishing ambitious targets for troop deployment and sustainability have not been met. The EU is still expected to be able to deploy operations of up to 50.000-60.000 personnel within 60 days and for up to a year, as foreseen by the Helsinki Headline Goal.

The Strategic Compass should provide sharper guidance on the crisis management tasks that EU member states are expected to carry out and on required force levels and packages. It should do so while considering how the context of potential European deployments has changed. This points to a much less permissive environment than

¹⁹ Council [Common Position 2008/944/CFSP](#), of 8 December 2008, defining common rules governing control of exports of military technology and equipment.

²⁰ Sophia Besch & Beth Oppenheim, [Up In Arms: Warring Over Europe's Arms Export Regime](#), Centre for European Reform, Policy brief, 10 September 2019.

anticipated 10 or 20 years ago due to the impact of several drivers of fragility (such as climate change, resource scarcity, unsustainable urbanisation) in unstable or conflict areas and to the diffusion of new technologies that empower potential state and non-state opponents.²¹

The Strategic Compass offers the opportunity to take a realistic look at successive headline goals and revise them considering current and foreseeable needs. This opportunity should be seized. Aside from the theoretical aspiration to deploy a corps-sized force under the Helsinki HG, even the much smaller and supposedly readily available EU battlegroups have never been deployed, although they have been operational on paper since 2007, and member states are reluctant to contribute to this rapid reaction force for the next few years. The Strategic Compass process should play a role in better linking the analysis of the threats with operational requirements.²² First, **it may be useful to think in terms of joint task forces that respond to the categories of threats that define the current strategic landscape**, including naval task forces, special operations task forces, gendarmerie-type task forces, medical task forces or cyber task forces. These could be assembled in different packages, alongside relevant strategic enablers, depending on the requirement of distinct operations. Second, looking at more demanding peace-enforcement or peace-keeping tasks, member states could join forces and contribute to the EU Crisis Response Operation Core (EU CROC) – a PESCO project originally intended to deliver a

division-size force package. **The EU CROC could become a driver for the prioritisation of other PESCO projects, with a view to equipping this force package with the necessary capabilities.**²³

While working towards more structured force packages under the CSDP, consideration should be given to possible linkages to other formats for operational cooperation, such as the Franco-British Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF), the UK-Nordic Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) or the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO). It would be useful to bring more clarity on how these force packages could contribute to CSDP operations, including the participation of non-EU countries. For example, it was envisaged that the CJEF could be deployed for EU (as well as NATO or UN) operations.²⁴ In this context, **options to connect the European Intervention Initiative (EI2), which includes the UK, and EU defence cooperation initiatives should also be explored.** Launched by France in 2018 outside the EU framework, the EI2 today brings together 14 countries that engage in sharing military experience and doctrines and carry out planning for possible contingencies, with a view to be better prepared to join forces for future interventions. On top of contributing to shaping a common strategic culture, the EI2 activities could pave the way to joint operational engagements, which could be carried out through EU structures and involve UK forces.

²¹ Gustav Lindstrom, "[Emerging security challenges](#)", in Daniel Fiott (ed.), *The CSDP in 2020. The EU legacy and ambition in security and defence*, EU Institute for Security Studies, 2020.

²² Fiott (2020), op. cit.

²³ Sven Biscop, [Putting the Core at the Centre. The Crisis Response Operation Core \(CROC\) and the](#)

[Future of PESCO](#), Egmont Security Policy Brief, No. 119, 3 December 2019; Biscop (2020), op.cit.

²⁴ UK-France Summit, [Declaration on Defence and Security Co-operation](#). London, 2 November 2010; UK-France Summit, [Declaration on security and defence](#), 17 February 2012,

The ambition to deploy larger CSDP operations with executive mandate also requires the reinforcement of EU operational planning and command and control structures. The Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC), established in 2017 and currently tasked with the planning and conduct of all non-executive operations and one executive operation, should be strengthened accordingly, including responsibilities for the planning and conduct of more than one executive operation.²⁵

On top of that, **strengthening the EU's crisis management capacity depends on making readily available adequate resources to fund CSDP operations.** Currently, the so-called Athena mechanism only covers about 10% of common costs (i.e., transport and other logistics), the rest being paid for by the participating countries (the 'costs lie where they fall' principle). In June 2018, the High Representative presented a proposal for a European Peace Facility (EPF), an off-budget instrument designed to allow the financing of operational actions under the CFSP by merging the existing mechanisms – the Athena mechanism and the African Peace Facility (APF) – into a single fund, and expanding their scope. The EPF is intended to provide larger and faster funding for CSDP operations, to support capacity building in partner countries and to contribute to finance peace support operations led by international partners. In July 2020, under the broader agreement on the next EU MFF 2021-2027, the European Council has set the envelope of the envisaged EPF at €5 billion – far below the €10,5 billion originally proposed by High Representative Mogherini. However, with about €700 million per year, it would still mark a significant increase in resources

compared to the combined annual expenditure under Athena and the APF.

Engage

Deliver security with partners

A more strategic and autonomous EU can and should be a stronger partner to cooperate with others to uphold security and stability in Europe and beyond.

Progress on defence cooperation within the EU will contribute to developing capabilities that member states will be able to use through a variety of institutions and coalitions.

Cooperation between the EU and NATO, as well as among Europeans within NATO, will be essential to ensure that European defence efforts and the Transatlantic security partnership are mutually reinforcing. In addition, helping build the capacity of partners to provide for their security and regional stability is another key dimension of Europe's contribution to international cooperation in this domain.

EU-NATO

EU's efforts in the defence field have been a cause of concern for some NATO members, worried that these efforts might lead to the weakening of the alliance. In practice, **Europeans are not in a position to choose between NATO and the EU.** Article 42.7 TEU does not replace Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty and more than 80% of NATO defence spending occurs outside the EU. For the 21 EU member states that are members of both organisations, it is paramount that NATO remains Europe's main organisation for collective defence.

Ensuring proper coordination between the two organisations will be crucial to

²⁵ [Letter](#) of defence ministers Florence Parly, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, Margarita Robles Fernández and Lorenzo Guerini, 29 May 2020.

avoid the perception that the pursuit of Europe's strategic autonomy might weaken NATO. In this sense, as noted above, the build-up of more credible European capabilities should not be perceived as a threat to NATO but as a contribution to the aim of a better burden-sharing within the North Atlantic Alliance. By strengthening their own military capabilities, member states will contribute to strengthening both NATO and the CSDP.²⁶

The EU and NATO have significantly increased their cooperation since the July 2016 Warsaw Joint Declaration. The latter outlined several concrete areas wherein cooperation between the two organisations should be enhanced, such as countering hybrid threats, operational cooperation, including at sea and on migration, cyber security and defence, defence capabilities, defence industry and research, and supporting Eastern and Southern partners' capacity-building efforts. Based on the mandate given by the Joint Declaration, common sets of proposals were endorsed by the EU and NATO in December 2016 and December 2017. More than 70 concrete actions are being implemented. On 10 July 2018, EU and NATO leaders signed a second joint declaration, calling for swift progress in implementing the common sets of proposal. Cooperation between the two institutions has visibly improved but there are still challenges and potential for cooperation that remains untapped.

While in areas such as crisis management, capacity building or cybersecurity, both the EU and NATO have a mandate and possess useful tools, they also each have their own strengths and limitations. Avoiding unnecessary duplication and a waste of resources is important, but it would be unrealistic to aim for a complete division of

labour. A certain degree of redundancy is unavoidable and can even be helpful in terms of resilience, as shown during the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, the two institutions should work to better coordinate their activities and develop their synergies and complementarity, for example in what concerns the protection of critical infrastructure and critical supply chains, cybersecurity, and capability development.

Another area of complementarity, and one of the main projects regarding EU-NATO cooperation, is military mobility, which concerns the transport of military forces across Europe by upgrading infrastructures and adopting necessary regulations. Under the agreement achieved by the European Council in July on the next MFF, the EU budget line supporting military mobility was cut from €5,6 billion (the amount proposed by the Commission in 2018), down to €1,5 billion. If this reduction may narrow the scope for collaboration between the two institutions on infrastructures, the EU and NATO should foster their efforts to streamline the regulatory arrangements enabling the movement of military forces across Europe.

EU-UK

The EU needs to invest in coalitions and formats bringing together like-minded countries willing and able to take military action. From this standpoint, the post-Brexit United Kingdom is a critically important partner. The security priorities and concerns of the EU and the UK are unlikely to significantly diverge in the coming years, which means both parties stand to gain from close cooperation. Before leaving the EU, the UK accounted for almost

²⁶ Corentin Brustlein & Luis Simón, "[Battle-Ready? Preparing European military forces for a more competitive environment](#)" in Corentin Brustlein (ed.),

Mutual Reinforcement: CSDP and NATO in the Face of Rising Challenges, Ifri, October 2019.

one quarter of EU member states' defence expenditure and for over a third of their investment in defence research. London has capabilities that are essential if Europeans aim to deploy robust crisis management operations on their own and has been willing to use them (although mostly outside the EU framework). At the same time, as Europe's security agenda expands well beyond the defence field, the EU's role in protecting Europe is growing across the board, from dealing with hybrid threats and cybersecurity to its fledgling contribution to defence research and capability development.

The EU has offered the UK a broad framework for consultation and cooperation in foreign, security and defence matters. The UK appears to prefer a flexible approach to cooperation with European partners, privileging direct links with key EU countries and engagement in the NATO framework.²⁷ That is unlikely to fundamentally change in the short-term but reinforcing the EU's contribution to Europe's security and defence would also make the EU a central partner for the UK. As argued above, therefore, fostering the EU's strategic autonomy is critical to advancing Europe's, and strengthening the security partnership between the EU and the UK should play a key role.

Working with partners

The EU has established a large web of security partnerships with third countries and international organisations. **In a more challenging strategic environment, engaging with partners will only become more important not only to uphold**

stability in Europe and beyond, but also to support a rules-based global order.

Strengthening these partnerships requires high-level political engagement, more resources, more focus and a clearer strategic drive to link security cooperation to broader foreign policy objectives.

All EU strategic documents place the United Nations at the core of the rules-based global order. EU member states are the largest contributor to the UN's peacekeeping budget and 11 EU missions and operations are currently deployed in parallel to UN missions. The two organisations agreed in 2018 on a number of priorities to strengthen their cooperation on peace operations and crisis management over the 2019-2021 timeframe.²⁸ In a global context of increasing geopolitical tensions and reduced US involvement in multilateralism, EU support for the UN will be pivotal for the future effectiveness of the UN as a peace-making body.

As the spread of jihadi terrorism, alongside the exacerbation of many other drivers of fragility, has undermined stability in the region stretching from the Sahel to the Horn of Africa, fostering cooperation with the African Union and supporting the African Peace and Security Architecture remains a priority for the EU. The recently adopted Communication on building a comprehensive partnership with Africa highlights the need to strengthen cooperation on peace and security.²⁹ At the same time, Europeans are likely to engage at multiple levels including sub-regional bodies, coalitions, and individual countries, which will require more focus on the coherence and consistency of these initiatives.

²⁷ Ian Bond, [Brexit and External Differentiation in Foreign, Security and Defence Policy](#), EU IDEA Policy Brief 2, September 2020.

²⁸ European External Actions Service, [Reinforcing the EU-UN Strategic Partnership on Crisis Management](#), June 2020.

²⁹ European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, [Towards a comprehensive Strategy for Africa](#), JOIN(2020) 4 final, 9 March 2020.

The EU's security cooperation with third countries takes place on various tracks. For one, through CSDP operations and missions, whether third countries are hosting or contributing to them. Framework Participation Agreements (FPAs) regulate third countries' participation in CSDP operations. For another, cooperation can focus on the broader security agenda, including counterterrorism and countering violent extremism (CVE), security-sector reform, border management, migration, hybrid threats, cybersecurity, and other challenges to resilience³⁰.

The proliferation of these partnerships and of their objectives, sometimes triggered by contingent needs such as strengthening border controls to cope with illegal migration, makes it even more important to give them strategic direction and avoid fragmentation among separate dialogues. **A more strategic approach to partnerships would better connect cooperation on security issues with the broader political objectives pursued by the EU and ensure coherence among the various vectors of cooperation.** One proposal is to consolidate multiple tracks of security cooperation into dedicated 'Security Compacts', to be agreed with selected third states, based on common security needs and responsibilities, and including specific objectives and timelines.³¹ In this context, the fact that in June 2020 the Council of the EU tasked the High Representative to present by the end of the year "concrete recommendations for a more strategic approach to EU partnerships on security and defence with third countries"³² is a step in the right direction.

The 2016 EU level of ambition featured building the capacity of partners as one of the three priority areas for EU security and

defence, alongside crisis management and the protection of the EU. The majority of the 35 CSDP mission and operations deployed so far included various forms of capacity building (e.g., security sector reform or the training of armed forces) in their mandates. Experience shows, however, that many of these missions and operations have been too small, too short, or too narrowly defined to have a meaningful impact on the security situation in the field.³³

To bring about change and build lasting capacity, the EU will need to mobilise larger resources, the necessary expertise for missions to perform in complex theatres, and the will to back up CSDP deployments with stronger and lasting political engagement. The envisaged EPF can help by covering a larger share of the funding of CSDP operations and by bringing more resources and more flexibility to support capacity-building. This applies, for example, to flanking CSDP training with the provisions of the equipment necessary for the security forces of third countries to operate effectively. However, this also requires establishing clear safeguards to ensure that this material is used in accordance with the rule of law, human rights, and democratic principles.

Finally, **the EU also needs to invest more in the technological resilience of its partners.** Some of them have been dealing with, for example, cyberattacks and disinformation for many years now. Investment in the resilience and security of partner countries would further secure EU supply chains as well.

³⁰ Thierry Tardy, [Revisiting the EU's security partnerships](#), EUISS Brief 1, 30 January 2018.

³¹ Ibid.

³² EU Council, [Council Conclusions on Security and Defence](#), 8910/20, 17 June 2020,

³³ Ana E. Juncos, "[Beyond civilian power? Civilian CSDP two decades on](#)" in Daniel Fiott (ed.), *The CSDP in 2020. The EU legacy and ambition in security and defence*, EU Institute for Security Studies, 2020.

Conclusion

In a volatile strategic context, Europe needs to uphold its interests, protect its own security, confront challenges beyond its borders and engage with partners to maintain stability and a rules-based international order. To succeed, Europeans need to become more strategic and more autonomous. Fostering strategic autonomy in security and defence matters remains controversial. Critics point to the fact that Europeans lack the capabilities and the necessary political will to take more responsibility for their security. Others worry that the pursuit of strategic autonomy may alienate the US and thus weaken NATO. Still others argue that strategic autonomy is ill-defined and that its implications are uncertain.

While it is important to recognise that the road towards strategic autonomy is paved with obstacles, and that the Atlantic Alliance remains essential to Europe's collective defence, these arguments reflect deeper problems – different perceptions of security priorities and a deficit of mutual confidence.

The debate about Europe's strategic autonomy, and the EU's role in advancing it, is primarily a political one. Incremental progress will depend on two factors. First, whether EU member states can seriously engage in a structured dialogue on respective threat assessments and priorities, aimed to define what they are prepared to do to support each other and contribute to joint undertakings. Second, whether the EU can harness its potential and deliver concrete results across all the dimensions covered by the EU's level of ambition. In other words, **confidence-building and tangible output go hand in hand.**

This paper has outlined several steps that the EU should take to foster its strategic autonomy in the security and defence

domain along three principal and mutually reinforcing lines of action: brace, empower and engage. That means increasing Europe's cohesion and resilience, sharpening the definition of common priorities and corresponding requirements, ensuring that the EU and its member states have the assets they need to match these priorities, and working with transatlantic allies and other partners.

Despite recent progress on the EU's security and defence agenda, most of the work lies ahead. Based on the ongoing analysis of the threats facing Europe, EU member states should mobilise the Strategic Compass process to translate their level of ambition into clearer priorities and should join forces to meet them. Doing so will also require a deeper reflection on the connection between EU defence efforts, cooperation among Europeans within NATO, strengthening the EU-NATO partnership, and the future defence relationships with the US and the UK.

The future course of US foreign policy is uncertain, and that will be a major factor impacting Europe's security and EU priorities. Scenarios differ significantly depending on the results of the November 2020 elections. Regardless of who wins, however, it is likely that the US will be more selectively involved in the crises in Europe's surroundings, that their resources may be under pressure, given a growing focus on the Asia-Pacific, and that the US demand for Europeans to do more for their security will only grow stronger. If, however, Europeans need to step up their game, it is only reasonable that they do so in the context of a more mature relationship with their US ally, less defined by dependence and more by an actual strategic dialogue. That includes advancing their industrial and technological capacity to cater to Europe's defence needs.

Strategic autonomy should not be approached as a binary choice between being fully autonomous or entirely dependent, but as a matter of degree. However, degrees matter a great deal. If full autonomy or independence are currently not in sight for Europe in security and defence matters, Europeans need to become more self-reliant to confront the large spectrum of threats they face. In some areas, such as strengthening Europe's resilience to hybrid and cyber threats, progress is being made. In others, such as crisis management, Europeans have built cooperative arrangements to develop the capabilities to perform a much more robust role, on their own if need be. However, these arrangements must be used, and capabilities must be integrated through effective force packages. As to protecting Europe against military threats, Europeans need to become more capable to assist each

other and join forces to bring more to the table of the Atlantic Alliance. **Through multiple tools and resources, the EU is in a unique position to empower its member states to implement all aspects of the 2016 level of ambition in security and defence. Mobilising this potential would bring a net strategic gain to Europe at large and to the transatlantic partnership. Failing to do so would be an unnecessary net loss.**

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This paper is part of the joint EPC-KAS project on “Fostering Europe’s strategic autonomy: priorities for action” that runs throughout 2020 and aims to outline a concrete agenda to strengthen Europe’s role in the world and its sovereignty.

In an increasingly competitive and volatile international environment, Europe needs a stronger power base to uphold its values and interests, confront challenges, engage with partners, and support rules-based cooperation. To attain these goals, the European Union needs to become a more strategic and autonomous actor on the global stage.

Pursuing strategic autonomy is ultimately about empowering Europeans to take and implement decisions to advance their priorities in cooperation with others, where possible, and on their own, if needed. This is essential to reinforce European sovereignty – Europe’s ability to shape its future.

Progress towards strategic autonomy requires concerted action across various domains, including Europe’s economic power base, technology and innovation and security and defence. This project encompasses activities targeting each of these areas, with a view to defining priorities for action for Europe in a challenging global context.

Already published:

J. Bjerkem, [A new Agenda for Trade and Investment](#), Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and European Policy Centre, June 2020.

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V. is a German political foundation with foreign offices across the world. Through its activities and projects, the Foundation aims to actively and sustainably contribute to international cooperation and understanding. The European Office in Brussels, which also functions as a regional office for the Benelux countries, particularly aims at supporting the European integration process and the dialogue between the Member States.

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