Marching to where? The operational dimension of the EU Strategic Compass

A report based on a webinar co-organised by the Clingendael Institute and the EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), and supported by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence of the Netherlands, on 28 April 2021.

Report

INTRODUCTION

The EU Strategic Compass will set out what the EU should be able to do and achieve in the area of crisis management and resilience in the next 5-10 years, and which capacities and partnerships (including EU-NATO) it will need in that regard. There are questions about the EU's military level of ambition, especially in terms of what type of missions and operations the Union should be able to carry out. Any operational commitments that may derive from the EU Strategic Compass will have implications for resources, command and control and capabilities. Finally, there is also a need to assess what type of military contribution can be made to enhancing resilience and countering hybrid threats.

NOTHING WITHOUT POLITICAL WILL

Political will from EU member states is at the core of any debate about operational effectiveness and credibility. The changing geopolitical threat landscape is already mobilising EU governments and crisis management today and in the future will be more intense. Strategic vacuums, technological shifts, hybrid threats, climate change and geopolitical competition will make crisis management more challenging. The Strategic Compass needs to provide greater operational clarity to the tasks listed in the November 2016 Council Conclusions under the "Annex to the Annex".

NEW THREATS AND CHALLENGES

Charting out in concrete terms the operational implications and capability requirements of the EU's existing military level of ambition is a key challenge for the Compass. There is also a need to contend with new challenges and risks, such as hybrid threats and geopolitical competition. Likewise, the EU must protect its access to the global commons (maritime, air, outer space, cyber). Given the range of threats facing the EU, the Union should plan for deployments in high-intensity environments, including autonomously if needed.

BREAKING PAST HABITS

In the past, however, the EU has had a tendency to over-promise and under-deliver on crisis management. The EU has not achieved the Headline Goals and it is currently engaged in low-intensity deployments, the majority of which are civilian rather than military missions. Today, the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) is still lacking resources despite an ongoing ambitious revision of its tasks. The history of the EU Battlegroups (EUBGs) shows that initial political ambitions can become deadlocked, as the EUBGs have still never been used and filling rosters is proving a systemic issue. The Compass should define more precisely an ambitious military level of ambition, but it has to be realistic at the same time.

INCENTIVISING EU ACTION

In order to encourage EU member states to launch missions and operations in an EU framework, there is a need to rethink incentives for EU action. The benefits of the wider EU security and defence toolbox should be clarified in the Compass, including the legitimacy of operating under an EU flag, pooling costs and providing financial incentives and developing a genuine integrated approach to crisis management. The European Peace Facility (EPF) should prove to be a key incentive and it could help the EU counter the harmful advances of adversaries in key geopolitical zones of interest. The EPF, which will finance its first projects in Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR) by the end of 2021, will be a crucial instrument to support partner countries bilaterally in military and defence matters.

COMMAND AND CONTROL

Investing in the Union's command and control structures is a way to improve timely military planning and action. The MPCC is currently being reviewed and is upping its level of ambition to respond to more demanding command requirements. The EU Military Staff is also adapting its structure in order to answer to new requirements in areas such as foresight, planning and cyber defence. There is also a need to improve the robustness of missions and operations. An example here would be the review of the concept for non-executive missions with which the EU aims to make the missions more credible, agile, influential and coherent (e.g. the development of EUTM Mali).

THE WILLING AND ABLE

Article 44 could allow willing and able states to more rapidly deploy under an EU flag. Given that Article 44 was last assessed before the EU Global Strategy, it could deserve a reappraisal in light of the geopolitical challenges facing the Union today. For example, Article 44 could enhance existing mission and operation mandates by assigning specific tasks to a grouping of willing and able member states.

EU STRATEGIC PRESENCES

The Coordinated Maritime Presence (CMP) concept could serve as a model for closer EU cooperation in other domains such as air and space. The CMP concept seems to offer a flexible model, but there remain questions about financing actions under the CMP and whether it would actually lead to greater political commitment to deploy military forces.

SPECIALISATION

There could also be room for a discussion on specialisation and a military division of labour within the Union, both in terms of capacities and operational abilities. This can build on existing bi-lateral or minilateral initiatives of defence cooperation outside of the EU framework. Bilateral/multilateral pooling of forces in specific areas, including joint training and exercises, can enhance the EU's capacity to act. This is a sensitive idea, because specialisation can only occur in a top-down manner when there is EU-wide agreement on its overall strategic objectives. This can and should however also be brought about in a bottom-up approach by member states that are willing to do so.

FORCE GENERATION

In terms of operational objectives, there is some debate about the continued relevance of the Headline Goals. On the one hand, they have not been met so there is a case for revising them in light of current challenges. Today's Headline Goals represent the military objectives of the early stages of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and they are largely focused on capabilities. On the other hand, revising the Headline Goals could be a way to lower the EU's overall level of ambition in defence and this should be avoided. Overall, the major issue rests with force generation. The reality is that most EU member states commit only a small fraction of their forces to CSDP missions and operations.

RAPID AND ROBUST DEPLOYMENTS

Currently, the EUBGs are being analysed to see if they can better contribute to EU operations. Although there are still worrying gaps in the rosters, the EUBGs could potentially serve as a strategic reserve for ongoing or future CSDP military operations. The challenge is that the EUBG framework is likely to remain inflexible and is bedevilled by a lack of force and enabler commitments. Beyond the limitations of the EUBGs, there has been a suggestion to create a 5,000-strong EU force – including all the required enablers – that could be based on more flexible arrangements. Such a force would pave the way for bringing coalitions of the willing into the EU framework.

ADVANCED SCENARIO PLANNING

Advanced planning for military scenarios and action could also be a way of enhancing the EU's ability to respond to crises in a more rapid and robust manner. Having in place plans for potential military scenarios and capability inventories within EU military structures could speed up the planning process for CSDP deployments. However, there are doubts about whether advanced planning will speed up the decision-making process, which is subject to political (dis)agreement between EU member states. In reality, any planning process is much smoother if there is political will behind a need to deploy and use force.