

# The Strategic Compass and the Western Balkans: Towards a tailor-made and strategic approach to partnerships?



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Report

## INTRODUCTION

The Strategic Compass has the ambition of developing a new approach to security and defence partnerships with international organisations and third states. So far, dialogues under the Compass process have reiterated the need to build a flexible and tailor-made partnership framework that considers the specificities of each partner and the importance of its contribution to EU actions. In this context, developing a tailor-made approach to partnerships with the Western Balkans should be a priority. Indeed, the integration of the Western Balkans in the EU remains a key strategic objective and it is in the shared interest of the Union and region to support the region's further Euro-Atlantic integration.

Building on the work of the Sofia Priority Agenda of 2018, and the European External Action Service's (EEAS) 2021 non-paper on the EU's reinforced engagement with the Western Balkans on Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the Strategic Compass provides an opportunity to achieve closer engagement and deeper dialogue with the region and EU candidate countries.

## STRATEGIC REALITIES

The countries of the Western Balkans continue on their path towards EU integration. EU enlargement to the Western Balkans is a question of *when* rather than *if*. The Western Balkans is a geopolitical priority for the EU and the Union remains the region's main economic and trade partner. However, the region is still marked by a range of challenges and the EU accession process has also come under strain and there is a perception that the momentum for EU enlargement is slowing. The pandemic has not helped with keeping the momentum on EU accession. This is a problem given the lack of progress in terms of producing substantial reforms in a number of areas, which remains a concern for the EU.

The EU's approach to the Western Balkans over the past few years has resulted in the emboldening of foreign powers in the region. This has also been accompanied by an increase in populism, disinformation and autocratic impulses in some countries. For example, Russia's and China's presence in the Western Balkans has increased since the Covid-19 pandemic in part because the EU was too slow to provide medical assistance to the region.

To deepen the EU's partnerships with Western Balkan countries there is a need for the Union to tackle the wider geopolitical challenges in the region. Although the EU is still deemed as the most important partner to the Western Balkans China, Russia and Turkey are showing greater interest in the region. In this respect, the EU should recognise that the Union's resilience is intimately bound up with the resilience of the Western Balkans. The region's internal security challenges can be imported into the EU and terrorism, radicalisation, violent extremism, organised crime, illegal migration and environmental risks need to be tackled with renewed energy.

Here, the EU needs to understand that it is involved in a battle for "hearts and minds" in the region. The EU is seen as a unique actor in the region, but it is still largely perceived as an economic rather than security or defence actor. The EU should be viewed as a comprehensive security actor but it has so far failed to impose itself in this manner in the region. One way around this could be for the EU to enhance its formal and official exchanges on security and defence with Western Balkan countries.

For this to happen, the EU should first view the candidate countries of the Western Balkans as *security providers* rather than *security consumers*. The EU's two CSDP deployments to the region (i.e. EUFOR Althea and EULEX Kosovo) will remain important, but there is a need for a mindset shift and recognition that the EU accession process has facilitated stronger security cooperation between the countries of the region in areas such as counter-terrorism, counter-radicalisation and managing illegal migration. This means that the EU is well placed to work with candidate countries on knowledge generation and intelligence gathering.

### THE NEED FOR NEW IMPETUS

Given these strategic challenges, it is necessary for the EU to develop tailor-made strategic partnerships for its partners in the Western Balkans. There can be no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to partners in the region because each has specific needs and contributions to make. Partnerships have to be in the interests of both parties. Strengthened dialogue on all levels would thus provide the necessary framework to address the actual needs of our partners. The review of the Sofia Priority Agenda could be taken into consideration, given that certain challenges have evolved since 2018, which would give additional impetus to the accession process.

Ideas such as inviting candidate countries to participate in Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) projects as third states or utilising the European Peace Facility (EPF) to build capacity in candidate countries could be explored further. Furthermore, Western Balkan countries already participate in CSDP missions and operations and they have on occasion also been part of the rotating EU Battlegroups (EUBGs) and other training initiatives and joint exercises. Serbia already has an Administrative Agreement with the European Defence Agency (EDA), and there could be scope to extend similar frameworks to other Western Balkan countries.

The EU-Western Balkan partnership could be strengthened and encouraged through civilian CSDP. Accordingly, the Civilian CSDP Compact could be a vehicle to build strategic partnerships in the Western Balkans and this could

facilitate greater involvement in civilian CSDP missions. Despite the budgetary, legal and administrative challenges that can face civilian CSDP deployments, missions could in future be tailored to support the region and the EU enlargement process. CSDP could also play a role in enhancing the democratic control of security services and militaries. Here, greater involvement in the training provided by the European Security and Defence College (ESDC) should be encouraged.

Beyond CSDP, the EU should also seek to boost cooperation with Western Balkans countries on countering hybrid threats. There is a clear need to counter disinformation, improve the resilience of critical infrastructure, support democratic processes and institutions and ensure cybersecurity. Tackling hybrid threats is particularly important given how disinformation and cyber criminality are worrying elements of terrorism, illegal migration, violent extremism and radicalisation. A large part of the strategy in this regard is extending the EU's connectivity initiatives to the region, especially as they relate to digitalisation and the green agenda. EU capacity building for cybersecurity and critical infrastructure is essential, but the Union should also enhance its strategic communication in the region. The EU needs to step up its public diplomacy efforts and better engage populations in the Western Balkans, especially with the youth.

One other idea could be for the EU to create a similar security policy dialogue framework to NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP). Accordingly, the EU needs to experiment with new dialogue formats to bring together partners in the region to discuss security and defence matters. For example, such formats could have proved useful during the Strategic Compass dialogue phase and this could have given Western Balkan countries a greater sense of buy-in for EU security and defence. Short of new formal dialogue formats, the EU could take more of a "Team Europe" approach to the region by using the EU Heads of Delegation to convene representatives of the EU Member States and regional partners to exchange information and engage in joint activities. The EU also recently deployed a military advisor to the EU Delegation to Serbia, and this could serve as a potential future model for the rest of the region.