

DEFENDING EUROPE

Analysing the threats and strategic challenges facing the EU

Final Report

INTRODUCTION

On 26 February 2020, the EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) and the Croatian Presidency of the Council of the EU co-organised an informal roundtable in Brussels focusing on the threats and strategic challenges facing the EU in the context of plans for developing a ‘Strategic Compass’. The event allowed participants to exchange views on the evolving threats currently facing the EU and the most effective way of understanding them.

The EU has to adapt to new geopolitical realities, and a strategic reflection on the threats facing the Union is needed

40 participants from EU member states, EU institutions and think tanks/universities were present at the event. The meeting was organised to inform the work on the Strategic Compass in line with the tasking by the Council of the EU in June 2019, the ministerial discussions during the November 2019 defence meeting under the Foreign Affairs Council, the HR/VP’s letter to defence ministers of December 2019 and the ‘fire side’ chat organised by the Croatian Presidency in Zagreb in January 2020.

NEW GEOPOLITICAL REALITIES

Overall, there was agreement that the EU had to adapt to new geopolitical realities, which necessitated the further development of the EU’s strategic reflection on security and defence. It was acknowledged that EU member states are divided when it comes to strategic interests and decisions, so a ‘threat analysis’ could be a way to stimulate a strategic discussion and eventually lead to a common strategic culture.

Many participants asked for clarity on the purpose of the Strategic Compass, and it was made clear that the Compass should provide more details about the implementation of the EU’s level of ambition (crisis management, capacity building and protecting Europe). The Compass will be preceded by a ‘threat analysis’ to provide a ‘360 degree’ mapping of the threats facing the Union. Some participants stated that the threat analysis should be forward looking, but others stated that what is important is to stimulate a strategic discussion among member states without focusing too much on processes or documentation.

The Strategic Compass should provide more details about the implementation of the EU’s level of ambition

Some participants called for the Strategic Compass to help generate a ‘common grammar’ in EU security and defence for concepts such as ‘strategic autonomy’ or the ‘European Defence Union’. Others stated that the focus should be on clarifying what capabilities the EU requires for the pressing geopolitical challenges it faces.

Not prioritising threats may avoid political sensitivities, but the risk is that it leads to a lowest common denominator threat analysis

TOWARDS A 'THREAT ANALYSIS'

The most obvious point of disagreement was on the form, structure and, ultimately, the objective of the 'threat analysis'. Some wanted the analysis to lead to the identification of threat priorities, whereas others thought this would be too politically sensitive because it might lead to an artificial 'ranking' of threats that would work against a number of member states. This led to some debate about whether the analysis should have a geographical or thematic focus to threats.

By avoiding any discussion of prioritisation political sensitivities could certainly be avoided, but the risk is that the process leads to a lowest common denominator threat analysis. Think tankers specifically criticised the lack of willingness to engage in a prioritisation of threats, despite the sensitivities. Nevertheless, the potential role of the intelligence community, including the EU's Intelligence Centre (INTCEN), was highlighted as a way of providing a non-political and classified basis for analysis.

FORM AND FUNCTION

Another point of contention centred on how the threat analysis process should be driven. Some argued in favour of a bottom-up approach, where national threat assessments would form the basis of discussion, plus existing NATO strategic documents should be drawn on too. Others contended that the analysis should not just represent a patchwork of national positions, but rather be based on an EU-wide perspective.

The close involvement of member states in this process was essential to ensure buy-in to the Strategic Compass initiative

Combining bottom-up and top-down approaches will be key throughout the threat analysis process. Participants agreed that, in any case, the close involvement of member states in this process was essential as a way to ensure their ownership/buy-in and, ultimately, the national implementation of the Strategic Compass. In the same vein it was highlighted that member states need to work on reaching a greater level of trust. Moreover, there was also broad agreement that there was an important role in the process for EU institutions such as the European Commission and that the interests of the Union and its citizens should be represented.

There is a need to ensure coherence between the Strategic Compass and existing documents such as the EU Global Strategy

There was also general agreement on the need to ensure coherence between the Strategic Compass and existing strategic guidance such as the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) and the Implementation Plan on Security and Defence (IPSD). Views diverged on whether it was necessary to establish a hierarchy and explicit linkages among those documents. Finally, some participants noted that linkages could be explored between the Strategic Compass and the Conference on the Future of

Europe, given the alignment of the two processes' timelines (2020 to 2022).