

Making the Strategic Compass work: How to embed EU ambitions in national defence planning?

A report based on a webinar co-organised by the Croatian Ministry of Defence and the EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) on 26 April 2021.

Report

INTRODUCTION

Ensuring that EU security and defence initiatives are embedded in national defence planning processes is a core challenge, and this is the missing link that could bring significant improvements to the implementation of EU security and defence initiatives. Despite the introduction of the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), which remain relatively young initiatives, national defence planners can be unaware of the full relevance and scope of EU initiatives and capability development and budgetary cycles may not always align. A lack of political visibility represents the additional challenge. However, EU security and defence initiatives can only be credibly implemented if they are reflected in national defence planning. Without national buy-in, it will be difficult to stimulate a culture of cooperation and common strategic perceptions in the EU.

This is a major task for the Strategic Compass, as defence planning rests with the member states. The sound implementation of the Strategic Compass after 2022 will require a strong connection with national defence planning, otherwise there is a risk that the Compass will not deliver tangible outcomes for EU security and defence and EU defence initiatives run the risk of being executed on an ad hoc basis. In this respect, it is necessary to scope out how far existing EU defence initiatives have been embedded in national planning processes, to learn from national experiences and to determine concrete ways of translating the EU's agreed priorities into national planning. Providing a political push, streamlining EU initiatives, setting clear operational tasks and scenarios and improving strategic communication are some of the areas where the Strategic Compass could make an impact.

Furthermore, there is a need to identify the major obstacles and enablers for stronger interconnections between national defence, EU defence and NATO. Acknowledging that both organisations are autonomous, there is a need to ensure adequate links and strategic exchange with NATO and its future Strategic Concept. Ultimately, both organisations are trying to impact national defence planning and there is a need for non-duplication, synergies

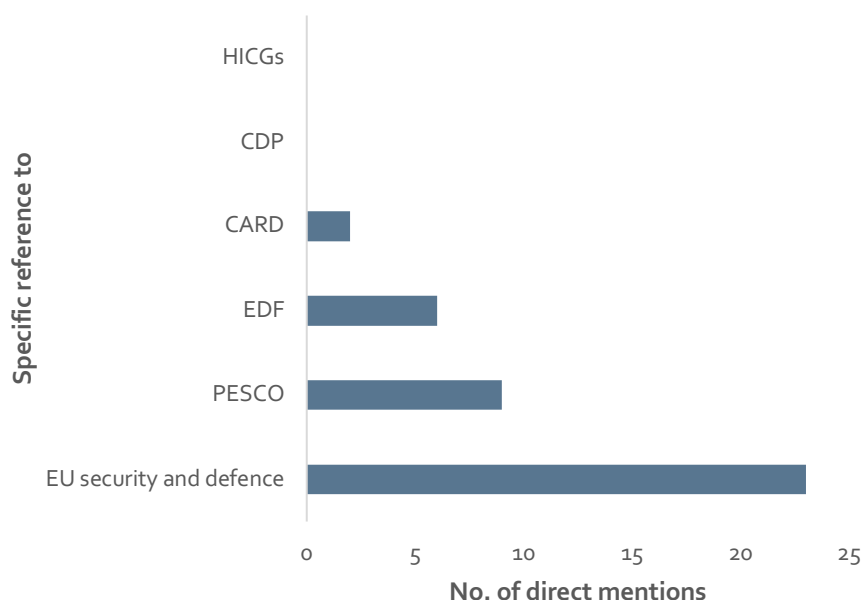
and coherence. Finally, it is necessary to identify incentives that could enhance the EU member states' greater ownership for EU defence.

DEFENCE CAPABILITY DEVELOPMENT IN THE EU: OPPORTUNITIES

It is not always easy to pin down the precise meaning of defence planning or capability development. Planning can involve multiple stakeholders from government, industry and research communities. There is also a difference between defence innovation, capability development or acquisition and operational plans and needs. In essence, defence planning implies a coherent link between operational, capability and industrial dimensions. Ensuring that EU-level capability development processes are firmly embedded in national defence planning processes is thus a multifaceted and challenging issue.

There are already **numerous references** to the importance of embedding EU defence mechanisms and tools in national defence planning. The June 2019 and 2020 Council Conclusions specifically call for member states to embed EU defence initiatives into national processes with the support of EU institutions. Furthermore, both the PESCO Strategic Review and the CARD report underline the need for national defence planning processes to make the best use of EU defence tools. Finally, the Strategic Compass Scoping Paper calls for EU military capability development initiatives to be embedded in national processes.

Figure 1 - National security and defence strategies since 2016: total specific references to EU security and defence initiatives



Note: the visual above shows the total number of specific references to EU security and defence initiatives in the national security and defence strategies of EU member states. 23 individual strategies have been consulted and only those published after 2016 have been referenced.

There is a growing awareness on the part of EU member states to further embed EU defence initiatives into national defence planning processes. Despite the fact that the majority of EU member states have greater experience with the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP), and given that EU defence initiatives are still relatively young, some member states have started to actively promote the EU defence agenda on a national basis.

Some have organised cross-departmental meetings or coordination and syndicate groups between defence, foreign affairs and other ministries (e.g. finance and economics) and stakeholders (e.g. industry and research institutes). Others raise awareness for European Defence Fund (EDF) opportunities and/or organise conferences for points of contact for PESCO projects. In a limited number of cases, the creation of new EU defence initiatives has contributed to synchronising national planning efforts and to raising awareness within defence institutions.

DEFENCE CAPABILITY DEVELOPMENT IN THE EU: CHALLENGES

Nevertheless, there are clear obstacles to embedding and more systematic use of EU defence initiatives in national defence planning processes. Political awareness appears to be a major issue in this regard and some national defence planners can be unaware of the full relevance and scope of EU initiatives. As Figure 1 above shows, even at the level of national security and defence strategies, there is not sufficient recognition of EU defence related tools in national strategic perceptions, even if there is a broad commitment to EU security and defence.

There are numerous reasons for this:

- 1) defence planning is not a very attractive topic and it is difficult to achieve political buy-in on a national basis even from ministers. Member states have different national bureaucratic and financial resource bases, which can limit engagement with EU defence initiatives;
- 2) the budgetary and procurement cycles of EU member states are not aligned and they respond to different timelines, financial envelopes and strategic ends – national processes are not very flexible;
- 3) in some cases there may be national legal, parliamentary and budgetary constraints that may make EU defence ambitions less applicable in nature;
- 4) defence planning involves long-term budgetary and procurement cycles (e.g. 5-15 years) and this lowers the degree of immediate national buy-in from policymakers. It is difficult to advance or postpone national defence capability priorities;
- 5) it is not always easy to identify who the main national interlocutors are for defence planning and multiple industrial and governmental stakeholders can be involved, and;

- 6) there is no clarity on what the EU's concrete defence ambitions are, and this contributes to a lack of awareness and buy-in at the national level.

A ROLE FOR THE STRATEGIC COMPASS

In order to address these challenges, the Strategic Compass should primarily focus on closing the gap between stated political objectives and concrete military guidance. To date, there is a gap between the EU's political ambitions and what member states can realistically achieve in a military sense. The EU's insistence on low-end missions and operations through CSDP is a turn-off for many defence planners and defence ministries. In this respect, the Strategic Compass has to provide a credible political narrative to more effectively link capability development efforts with overall strategic objectives.

One way of doing this is to engage in realistic, high-end, operational scenarios that may even go beyond traditional crisis management tasks. Accordingly, as EU member states hold the financial resources for defence investments they need to see collective investments and defence cooperation as genuine ways of countering the threats they face.

Any commitment for embedding EU defence initiatives in national defence planning processes should be long-term in nature. Here, an emphasis should be placed on better horizon scanning for future technology and capability needs and trends. This way, collaborative opportunities can be identified and addressed in a timely manner. The CARD already offers this opportunity and it is helping to set priorities for PESCO projects. In this sense, existing EU defence mechanisms are making a practical contribution to defence planning efforts, even if EU tools can be better synchronised in line with institutional and budgetary cycles at the EU level (e.g. the Multi-annual Financial Framework).

Streamlining EU defence initiatives: EU member states still do not perceive the EU as an important option when addressing capability shortcomings, and there is a perception that the EU capability development process is too complex or fragmented. In many cases, national defence planning time horizons and bureaucratic processes do not align with EU tools such as the EDF and so national defence budgets may require greater flexibility.

Accordingly, EU institutions can build on their role of facilitating cooperation by providing expertise, information exchange and enabling concrete collaborative defence capability projects. CARD, PESCO and the EDF are extremely useful in this regard. CARD should continue to monitor closely how committed member states are to EU defence initiatives, while also providing an indication of how far EU initiatives correspond to national planning efforts.

A key way of raising the profile of the EU in national defence planning is to demonstrably show that EU cooperation reduces costs and time when developing capabilities. Here, an option could be for the EU to better align its defence initiatives with the Union's overall multi-annual financial framework

in order to enhance the political visibility of defence and ensure adequate financial investments.

Clear operational tasks and scenarios: a core issue at the EU level is the gap between political and military guidance. The NDPP profits from a close articulation of ends, ways and means and the Compass provides an opportunity to ensure similar clarity in the EU. National defence planning will be aided by greater operational clarity at the EU level and the Compass should spell-out where, when and how the EU should act militarily. A number of national defence planners are put off by the fact that the EU focuses on low-end missions and operations with a strong civilian, rather than military, focus.

There is also a need for forward planning for the EU's capability, industrial and technology needs of the next 5-15 years, and this may require a more frequent and regular revision of the Strategic Compass at each new institutional cycle. Ensuring that the Strategic Compass is not a "one shot" process is important, but follow on documents from the first Strategic Compass process should be actively avoided. Although the Compass will not solve every challenge in EU defence, it can usher in a stable, streamlined and predictable process and generate political awareness of EU defence initiatives.

Finally, there is an important EU-NATO dimension to defence planning. The reality is that most EU members that are also part of NATO have a longer experience of engaging with the NDPP in national defence planning. NATO processes remain the key referent for most EU member states' national defence processes, although even the alliance faces defence planning challenges. EU defence capability processes are not designed to duplicate the NDPP, not least because EU efforts emphasise collaboration rather than targets. Ensuring the coherence of EU and NATO initiatives is important, but it is important not to forget the level of existing cooperation and how PESCO is designed to contribute to EU and NATO capability gaps. The ongoing reflection processes in the EU and NATO (i.e. the EU Strategic Compass and NATO Strategic Concept) provide a unique opportunity for enhanced consultations and a shared understanding for how both organisations impact national defence planning.

Strategic communication: In order to generate more political buy-in for EU defence initiatives, the Compass should not overlook the importance of political narratives. It is noteworthy that defence ministers tend to listen to policy advisors rather than defence planners. This can mean that defence planners struggle to keep up with the ambitions of policymakers, but it also means that policymakers need an incentive to engage with EU efforts. However, in order to bring policymakers and defence planners closer together at the national level, the gap between the rhetoric and realities of EU defence needs to be better managed.

Brussels-based discussions can appear disconnected from national realities and EU and NATO processes can be perceived as frustrating, confusing and even annoying. National defence bureaucracies can be conservative and not open to change. Additionally, the track record of EU defence capability development over the past twenty years has not been very encouraging.

Making the Strategic Compass work: How to embed EU ambitions in national defence planning?

Accordingly, the Strategic Compass needs to create a compelling narrative based on concrete actions that can bring together policy and defence planners at the national level. Finally, there will be national buy-in if member states see their national interests at stake in EU ambitions and processes – therefore, embedding EU defence initiatives in national processes is not just a question of awareness raising or better communication.