Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'The EU Strategic Compass'

(own-initiative opinion)

(2023/C 140/04)

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1. Summary and recommendations

1.1. The Strategic Compass marks an important step forward. It is a catalogue of very important concrete projects and measures that enhance European security. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) believes that it must be expanded to form a comprehensive strategy for European foreign and security policy and that civil society must be involved in this process.

1.2. The EESC stresses that security goes far beyond defence and that a comprehensive EU security strategy should focus on civilian and preventive aspects as well, in order to back up and complement the concrete defence measures.

1.3. The EESC stresses the preventive importance of social justice, economic prospects and environmental sustainability. Social peace and economic stability are important prerequisites for non-violence. Limiting global warming and managing its consequences are key to maintaining social order and peace in the world.

1.4. The Strategic Compass does not sufficiently take into account the role European civil society can and must play in order to attain greater resilience against hybrid attacks and the systematic undermining of cohesion and solidarity within and between the EU Member States by inimical powers.

1.5. Civilian and preventive security policy go hand in hand with military defence capabilities. The latter must be regarded as an indispensable condition for safety and, in view of its deterrent effect, also as preventive.

1.6. The EESC takes the view that the Strategic Compass paints an overly positive picture of European security and defence policy.

1.7. NATO is not merely a strategic partner for the EU, but its key security provider. Europeans must contribute greater added value to NATO through measures that strengthen their own ability to act strategically. So far, the EU and NATO have not fully exploited the potential of their cooperation. Strengthening the European pillar of security and defence means strengthening NATO.

1.8. Ultimately, the EU must take more responsibility and create a European Defence Union as the European pillar of NATO, ensuring that it fully respects and is compatible with the neutrality of some of its Member States.

1.9. The EU should develop a better understanding of the crucial importance of the transatlantic partnership for NATO — and thus for European security.

1.10. Too many EU members have for a long time neglected their defence commitments and capabilities, which has led to their armed forces becoming drastically under-equipped, unprepared and lacking in interoperability.

1.11. The EU Member States need to better coordinate national capability development and defence planning, and undertake much more joint procurement. Greater effectiveness of European defence capabilities must be achieved through much better coordination of national industrial policies.

1.12. Europe's capacity to act must be strengthened by introducing majority voting on foreign and security policy.

1.13. As an important additional element of the Strategic Compass, the role that European civil society can play in terms of solidarity, cooperation and resilience must be identified.

1.14. The EESC suggests public forums for strategic debates at European and national level.

2. **General comments**

2.1. This own-initiative opinion examines the impact of the Strategic Compass and seeks to carry out a policy assessment of its European objectives and opportunities from a civil society perspective. The EESC welcomes the European Union's initiatives to strengthen European security and defence.

2.2. Civil society is not a bystander in security issues and its voice must be heard. In the event of conflict, civilian institutions are hit hard and civilians suffer the devastating consequences of war.

2.3. From a civil society perspective, the Strategic Compass has adopted a narrow perspective of security, with a particular focus on defence. The EESC stresses that security goes far beyond defence and that an EU security strategy should focus more on civilian and preventive aspects than the Strategic Compass currently does.

2.4. The European Union (EU) is the antithesis of violence and war. The EU must make better use of its political, material and cultural resources to contribute to the peaceful resolution of conflicts and to prevent military escalation, as this is where the EU's potential for important added value — and its impact in the world to date — may lie. It must advocate more effectively for a return to multilateral arms control agreements, the observance of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, and the commitment to nuclear disarmament.

2.5. A rules-based multilateral order is essential for defending universal human rights. Together with all like-minded partners worldwide, the EU must do everything in its might to strengthen and, where necessary, restore and renew the rules-based multilateral order. Raw power politics and the 'right of the strongest' are incompatible with democracy and the rule of law. Security without freedom would be meaningless. At the same time, security is also an important precondition for freedom.

2.6. Civilian and preventive security policy does not conflict with military defence capabilities. On the contrary, the latter must be regarded as an essential prerequisite for safety and, in view of its deterrent effect, also as preventive.

2.7. Political and financial investment in security and defence require a solid and serious assessment of the (a) systemic and (b) material strengths and weaknesses of the European Union and its capacity to (i) provide for its own security; (ii) project stability to its neighbourhood; (iii) secure global trade routes and access to critical goods and materials; and, last but by no means least, (iv) through its Member States, be a reliable and clearly committed partner in the alliances that are essential not only for European security.

2.8. Security and freedom cannot be achieved through military capabilities alone. It requires a holistic social, economic and environmental approach, and better intelligence and foresight. Preventive policy and conflict resolution through diplomatic and civilian means must be a priority, and the use of military power must remain the last resort. However, this also involves having credible military capabilities and an undoubted willingness to make use of them if unavoidable. The EU needs to safeguard its interests more robustly.

2.9. Keeping a just peace is the ultimate goal of the global security system, and multilateralism is the best instrument to achieve that goal. However, it is under increasing strain, and the EESC echoes the Global Peace Report 2022 recommendations in calling for action to strengthen the global architecture of peace ([1]).

2.10. The implementation of measures to strengthen defence capabilities and increase security requires more interinstitutional consistency, no operating in silos and above all a strong commitment from the Member States.

2.11. The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the return of war to Europe and of harsh power politics call for effective deterrence capabilities. Although the EU was never designed to pursue great power politics, it must now adapt to the increasing systemic competition between the great powers, with Russia and China challenging the international system and safety. Russia is openly violating the UN Charter, and China is violating universal human rights, as clearly visible in Xinjiang and Hong Kong.

2.12. The US, Canada and other democracies in the world are important partners when it comes to implementing what all United Nations Member States have formally and voluntarily committed to: universal human rights — rights that permit of no derogation whatsoever in any place.

2.13. The EU should develop a better understanding of the crucial importance of the transatlantic partnership, i.e. EU-US relations, for NATO and thus for European security. Although the US has increasingly shifted its focus of interest to the Asian and Pacific region in recent years, Russia's aggression shows that the global order must continue to be secured and defended, including, if necessary, in Europe.

2.14. NATO is not only a strategic partner of the EU; Europe's military defence is ensured by NATO, and the European Pillar of Defence should be developed in full complementarity. Russia's attack on Ukraine and the international security order confirms this in every respect. More European defence cooperation can strengthen NATO and improve Europe's capacity to act in order to contribute more effectively to its own security and regional stability.

2.15. Although the EU as a polity and NATO as an alliance are not at all identical, the overlap between both — not only in terms of values and goals — is growing significantly. Once Finland and Sweden become NATO members, 23 countries will be members of both organisations. Europeans can and must contribute greater added value to the alliance through measures that strengthen their own ability to act strategically. Ultimately, the EU must take more responsibility for its security and create a European Defence Union as the European pillar of NATO, fully respecting the neutrality of some of its Member States.

2.16. Too many Member States have neglected their defence capabilities for too many years. Sometimes inadequate — but above all ineffective– defence spending has led to the armed forces in many EU Member States becoming drastically under-equipped, unprepared and lacking in interoperability. Where these EU Member States are also members of NATO, they are therefore neglecting their obligations to the alliance.

2.17. Europe's defence capability depends not only on the size of the budget allocated to it, but above all on this budget being used efficiently. Currently the different weapons systems in the EU create duplication, high costs and inefficiencies. The EU Member States need to better coordinate national capability development and defence planning, and undertake

([1]) *Common Security — For our shared future*, Stockholm, 2022.

much more joint procurement. Consistent procurement policies at EU and national level should be adopted in order to reach the economies of scale needed to reduce costs and to be able to generate sufficient activity to ensure the existence of nascent start-ups ([2]). Current practices on the European defence market reflect the high cost of non-Europe.

2.18. Despite the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), and the European Defence Fund (EDF), the EU has made too little progress in developing effective joint structures that would enable it to provide for its own security. Of relevance here is the Versailles Declaration of March 2022, based on the decision of the Heads of State and Government of December 2021, which states that the European Union will 'take more responsibility for its own security and, in the field of defence, pursue a strategic course of action and increase its capacity to act autonomously'.

2.19. The EU's capacity to act in foreign and security policy would be strengthened by moving away from unanimous decisions (the capacity of each single Member State to block all others) in the Council in the field of foreign policy. As an intermediate solution, a temporary test phase of qualified majority voting or super-qualified majorities (i.e. higher thresholds for the qualified majority) could be considered. However, it is not the institutional framework that primarily prevents the Member States from acting coherently together. Rather, the Member States circumvent the existing institutional framework, do not exploit its potential, and do not allow themselves to be integrated into it.

2.20. Europe as a security provider may need a new narrative and tangible measures, backed by civil society and civic engagement, in order to strengthen European identity and solidarity without falling into the trap of replacing nationalism with a European jingoism. Public participation should be open, transparent and inclusive.

3. **Positive elements of the Strategic Compass**

3.1. The Strategic Compass's objective of achieving more security through capacity building ('act'), better preparedness ('secure'), targeted investment ('invest') and more cooperation ('partner'), as well as of strengthening partnerships and alliances, has been chosen well.

3.2. The Strategic Compass promises European resolve to uphold the principles of the UN Charter and to restore peace and defend freedom in Europe.

3.3. In terms of security, the Strategic Compass describes China as a 'systemic rival', which its massive violations of universal human rights, its continued threat towards Taiwan, and its support for the Russian aggressor have demonstrated it to be. The Strategic Compass highlights that China and Russia are challenging the international order. They are expanding their nuclear arsenals and developing new arms systems.

3.4. The Strategic Compass highlights the dangerous erosion of the arms control architecture and the negative impact of this 'normative void' on the security of the EU.

3.5. The EU has legitimate interests in all regions of the world. The Strategic Compass does not systematically cover all of these but it rightly states that, as seen specifically in the Western Balkans, European inactivity invites other powers in to fill the space.

3.6. The Strategic Compass claims that the EU needs to act with a far greater sense of urgency and determination and that the Member States must be able to rely on mutual assistance. The importance of Article 42(7) TEU is therefore stressed. The EU should clarify the consistency between this primary legal basis and the duty to provide assistance under Article 5 of the NATO Treaty.

([2]) *Roadmap on security and defence technologies* (COM(2022) 61 final), paragraph 4.9.

3.7. Increased readiness and interoperability have been identified as priorities and the Strategic Compass states that these need to be in line with NATO. The Strategic Compass positions the EU as an enabler of better European defence by announcing that it will close critical capability gaps, strengthen the resilience of European societies, and project stability into the European neighbourhood. A first step is to establish the Rapid Deployment Capacity, consisting of 5 000 troops, due to be fully operational by 2025. The EESC points out that it is high time to deliver, since the EU had already set more ambitious targets in this regard more than two decades ago, which have not yet been met.

3.8. Though the Strategic Compass does not refer to the introduction of qualified majority voting in foreign policy, it calls for constructive abstentions in order to allow willing Member States to move forward. In this context, greater use could be made of Article 44 TEU in order to allow cooperation between willing Member States with appropriate capabilities in the area of Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) by means of a delegation by the Council.

3.9. The Strategic Compass aims to combine civilian and military missions and operations in the framework of CSDP in a constructive way. It stresses the importance of civilian CSDP missions in the context of non-military responses. The Strategic Compass seeks greater cooperation between the CSDP and the EU's justice and home affairs stakeholders.

3.10. The EESC welcomes the fact that the Strategic Compass takes an action-oriented approach; it lists specific proposals and steps, as well as target dates and milestones in order to measure progress, which the Council of the EU and the European Council are to review regularly.

3.11. The Strategic Compass also underlines important measures to better introduce the concept of 'gender, peace and security' and climate efficiency to CSDP missions and operations. Notably, by 2023 the EU will strengthen its network of universal human rights and gender advisors in its CSDP missions and operations, and the implementation of the EU's climate change and defence roadmap will lead the military sector towards climate neutrality.

4. **Critical comments on the Compass**

4.1. The Strategic Compass is a very ambitious document that sets out more than 80 concrete actions to be taken by 2025. Strong political will by the Member States is needed in this regard, otherwise, the document risks reflecting more an EU that lacks competence in foreign policy and defence matters.

4.2. The Strategic Compass is characterised by a narrow concept of security: security is about more than defence. More prevention and foresight are crucial in order to avoid military conflicts. The Strategic Compass is focused on defining a catalogue of concrete projects and actions. This is welcomed by the EESC. However, it does not refer to specific geographical areas and does not sufficiently define where the EU wishes to project stability and security in line with its values and objectives, including outside its territory, for example in its immediate neighbourhood. It must be widened to form a comprehensive strategy including the involvement of civil society.

4.3. The Strategic Compass paints a rather positive picture of the coherence in the EU's security and defence policy and its potential capabilities e.g. when it states that its strength in preventing and addressing external conflicts and crises lies in its ability to use both military and civilian means. The Compass does not give specific examples of where this would be successful. However, an unrealistic analysis cannot provide a solid basis for a security strategy. The EU's self-assessment as a consistent leader in multilateral solutions and its self-praise explicitly expressed in the Strategic Compass e.g. for shouldering its global security responsibilities, lack the capacity for an honest inventory.

4.4. The EU may have invested a lot of political and financial resources in multilateralism; however, at least until Russia's onslaught, the EU Member States had only been pursuing coordinated European foreign policy goals when it suited their own national interests directly. There are various examples illustrating this fundamental lack of strategic foresight, including, to name but a few: the Western Balkans enlargement process; Europeans' reactions to the Libyan war; energy, raw materials and other supply dependencies; European representation in the United Nations; and the varying degrees of investment in national military capacities in terms of GDP ratios.

4.5. The Strategic Compass recognises NATO as important for European security, but this is not enough. The Strategic Compass speaks of a strategic partnership with NATO, of complementarity, and of decision-making autonomy. However, only a few Member States remain neutral, i.e. outside NATO, and the alliance is more than just a strategic partner for Europe. NATO is, and will be for the unforeseeable future, Europe's sole valid security guarantor. However, the EU can help Europeans better organise their contribution to European security by pooling their defence capabilities and abandoning uncoordinated national policies in favour of a joint European approach. Despite many good approaches in the Strategic Compass, neither organisation, whether the EU or NATO, has yet exhausted its full potential for cooperation.

4.6. The concept of European strategic autonomy must be clearly defined when applied to matters of security and defence, as is the case in the Strategic Compass. Strategic autonomy is not about the EU going alone, but becoming a better partner, capable to act when necessary, also when support may not be available. It must not mean maintaining equidistance from the world powers, as already stressed by the EESC in its recent opinion on transatlantic relations. The USA is and remains Europe's most important ally and partner. The EU should nonetheless follow a path of reducing strategic dependencies, including in the security and defence sectors, as stated in the EESC's opinion on the *Roadmap on security and defence technologies* ([3]).

4.7. One-sided European dependencies must be reduced, and not only in the field of defence. This is of crucial importance for European security. However, the EESC believes that interdependencies, especially between like-minded partners, are not only beneficial but a *sine qua non* for a rules-based multilateral order.

4.8. Concerning the future military capabilities of the EU, the 'Rapid Reaction Force', as announced in the Strategic Compass, tally with concepts of quickly deployable smaller forces in the framework of internationally coordinated missions. However, these efforts cannot be seen independently of a valid European contribution to its own security in the context of NATO. European efforts need to support the efficiency of the European pillar of NATO. At the moment, it is unclear how the Member States of both the EU and NATO can provide enough resources for both the NATO Response Force and the EU Rapid Reaction Force in the event these resources were to be activated simultaneously. In addition, some of the measures presented with regard to rapidly deployable troops fall short of decisions already taken decades ago (Helsinki 1999).

4.9. The Strategic Compass does not take into account the role civil society in Europe can and must play in order to attain more resilience against the systematic undermining of cohesion and solidarity within and between the EU Member States by inimical powers.

4.10. An upgrading of the European Union as a democratic and rule-of-law-based security provider necessitates not only strong(er) European institutions and more foresight by the Member States, but also vast cross-border societal alliances, which is inconceivable without a strong and vivid pan-European organised civil society and fully engaged European social partners.

4.11. Hostile attacks include not only military operations, but also disinformation, cyberattacks, economic blackmail, etc. The Strategic Compass mentions the development of a Hybrid Toolbox for coordinated response to hybrid threats and the Foreign Information, Manipulation, and Interference Toolbox, as well as the strengthening of the Cyber Diplomacy Toolbox. However, the Strategic Compass needs to elaborate more on this crucial aspect. The EU is in urgent need of a cross-institutional approach to fending off such attacks and interference, which must involve representative civil society, in order to lay the foundations for effective solidarity, cooperation, and resilience among European citizens, especially at the local level, where the impact of such attacks is felt most directly.

4.12. Europe's security is not only threatened by military attacks in the traditional sense. Cyberattacks and acts of sabotage against private companies, public institutions and critical infrastructure should also be seen as hybrid belligerent attacks that can cause devastating damage. The Strategic Compass falls short on this aspect, especially when it comes to effective protection and response measures.

([3]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the roadmap on security and defence technologies (COM(2022) 61 final) (OJ C 443, 22.11.2022, p. 112).

5. **Recalibrating the compass**

5.1. The EESC fully agrees that the EU must reckon with increasingly aggressive revisionist powers that violate the UN Charter. A rules-based multilateral order can be restored if liberal democracies adhere to their principles, underpin them with diplomatic, civilian and military capabilities, and avoid giving in to the temptations, pressure and threats of authoritarian powers.

5.2. European politics must serve the goal of preventing armed conflict while also taking into account the fact that the world is much less peaceful than it seemed after the end of the Cold War. Therefore, European society needs a political consensus on effectively building up its defences against any potential aggressor, above all its civil protection capacities. More public debate and active involvement of civil society actors are key.

5.3. The transatlantic partnership requires much more political investment. While it goes beyond NATO, it is a supporting pillar of the alliance. Europeans must put more effort into maintaining and deepening EU-US relations. A stable partnership with the US, both in terms of trade relations and in terms of security, is of the utmost importance.

5.4. A nuclear-weapon-free world is a European goal. Until this has been achieved, the American nuclear security guarantee for Europe, NATO's nuclear deterrence and the French dissuasion force remain indispensable for European security.

5.5. The European partners must urgently focus on more efficiency in their military spending. This can be achieved through, among other things, much more interoperability of their national conventional military systems. The Member States must overcome current difficulties and misunderstandings about their purchase of urgently required short-term defence capabilities and find a common approach to strengthening their defence systems in a medium- to long-term perspective through joint procurement and joint collaborative projects. Joint European projects should not shut out close allies and partners, but their access to the European defence market must be strictly based on reciprocity.

5.6. The GDP ratio for defence expenditure is important in as much as it was agreed between the Western allies — *pacta sunt servanda*! In terms of effective capabilities, it is more important to define these thoroughly and to achieve them in good time. Whether this requires exactly 2 or possibly more percent of GDP is of secondary importance. What matters is that a potential aggressor estimates the costs of an attack as being too high. The EU must build on its tools and institutions, such as PESCO, CARD, the EDF and the European Peace Facility, in order to make its Member States defence spending more effective.

5.7. Defence procurement and the fabric of the European defence industries are of crucial importance for European security. They do not obey the rules of the market alone. However, European security must not be impaired by costly and ineffective compromises. Joint projects should be defined by the capability of competitive and innovative industries to deliver and not by national quotas in cooperative projects.

5.8. The Compass does cover many important aspects of security. but it does not speak enough about intelligence. The EU should update the Compass by including a clear analysis of European intelligence capabilities and concrete proposals for how to improve them.

5.9. National defence forces need streamlining, i.e. effective joint command structures that ultimately create the basis for joint European forces. The European Union Military Staff and the European Defence Agency must be brought to life.

6. **Civil society contributions to Europe's security and defence**

6.1. The Strategic Compass marks an important step forward. It should be expanded to include a European foreign policy strategy, characterised by a broader concept of security that also aligns with the UN Sustainable Development Goals and actively involves civil society.

6.2. More intelligence, prevention and foresight are crucial in order to avoid military conflicts. Many EU Member States must invest more in their defence capabilities and most of them have begun to do so. This must be a long-term engagement, and needs the support of civil society. The European pillar of NATO must ensure military deterrence but the EU must increase its capability, including through its own military means, to make concrete preventive contributions to regional peace and stability.

6.3. The EU should support the Member States, as the Compass suggests, in improving their cooperation in order to reduce ineffective fragmentation and costly duplication of their defence capabilities; however, as long as it does not have genuine competence for defence, the EU should continue to invest its limited resources primarily in civilian policies and mechanisms in order to enable conflict prevention. This is where civil society can make a real difference through its social and economic networks and its strong potential for public and cultural diplomacy.

6.4. A free and vibrant civil society can be an automatic stabiliser in times of crisis affecting European security. It has proved to do so for instance with regard to the Russian aggression, with millions of EU citizens in many Member States hosting and helping Ukrainian refugees, with an exceptional willingness to help especially in the EU Member States neighbouring Ukraine. A comprehensive approach to security must also involve European emergency preparedness and continued support for civil society organisations.

6.5. The EESC stresses the importance of social justice, economic prospects and environmental sustainability for security. Social peace is an important prerequisite for non-violence. Limiting global warming and managing its consequences are key to maintaining social order and peace in the world.

6.6. The EESC suggests having public forums for strategic debates so that civil society can contribute to developing a Europe that protects and strengthens its resilience against inimical attacks that undermine morale and political stability inside and between the Member States. 'In the struggle for advantage among world powers, it is not military or economic might that makes the crucial difference but the fundamental qualities of a society' ([4]).

6.7. The EESC, its Section for External Relations (REX) and, with a view to the defence industry, the Consultative Commission on Industrial Change (CCMI) ([5]) can play a key role in the dialogue between the political level and society on security in Europe and the world. The EESC will continue to call for regular updates to the Strategic Compass and thoroughly assess new related initiatives such as the Defence Package.

6.8. The Russian aggression and the systemic rivalry with China underline that the EU has no time to lose in adapting to geopolitical realities. In liberal democracies this can only be achieved in close cooperation with and with the political support of civil society.

Brussels, 24 January 2023.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Christa SCHWENG

([4]) Mazarr, M. J.: *What Makes a Power Great. The Real Drivers of Rise and Fall, Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2022, p. 52.
([5]) https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/sections-other-bodies/sections-commission/consultative-commission-industrial-change-ccmi