



CENTRO STUDI SUL FEDERALISMO

PUTTING THE *STRATEGIC COMPASS* TO THE TEST OF METHOD AND TIMING

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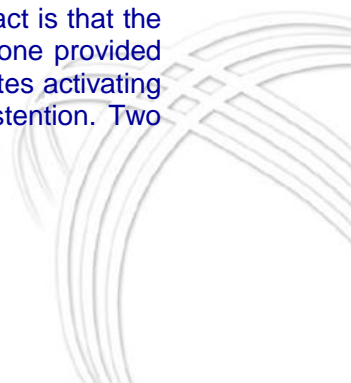
Jacques Delors used to remind us that in his European initiatives he was inspired by Jean Monnet, and thus by the criteria that any European initiative had to meet in order to have a chance of success. One of these requires the definition of an objective, a method and a timetable. The [*Strategic Compass*](#) proposal presented by the High Representative Josep Borrell, discussed on 15 November 2021 by the EU Council of Ministers, in the format of the Foreign and Defence Ministers, meets the three criteria just mentioned; however, the inherent pitfalls cannot be masked, especially with reference to the second and third criteria.

The document identifies what are considered to be the main geo-strategic threats and discusses the four areas in which they should be addressed. In the language of the document these are: “*Act, Secure, Invest, Partner*”. Each of these aspects would require a specific comment, but here, except for a brief final remark, we limit ourselves to the first – ‘Act’ – as it is the objective from which we expect results that can give the signal that we are indeed moving towards a European federal defence.

This is the objective to which both Borrell and Ursula von der Leyen referred when they said that the EU must also be able to “use the language of force”. In fact, the creation of an *EU Rapid Deployment Capacity* of 5,000 men, including land, air and sea components, is envisaged. “It should be able to respond to imminent threats or quickly react to a crisis situation, for example a rescue and evacuation mission or a stabilisation operation in a hostile environment.” Training exercises will be organised within the EU framework to increase the speed of mobilisation and interoperability, and, for its effective deployment, this force will be equipped with the necessary enablers, such as strategic transport, cyber defence, communications and intelligence and satellite surveillance and recognition capabilities. For command and control, national headquarters or the EU Planning and Operations Command Capability will be used once fully operational.

Compared to the ‘Battlegroups’ that have thus far been discussed at the European level, which have never been used and on which the planned rapid reaction force will be based, these new features seem to be the provision of the means to support operations and make reference to a European command structure. However, we believe that the innovations are in the method suggested for their implementation and, above all, the use of the intervention force and the timetable envisaged for its establishment.

The procedure foresees the opening of a phase of reflection by the governments, and subsequent discussions in the EU Council of Ministers until arriving, on the basis of a shared text, at the final decision by the European Council (which constitutes the decision-maker of last resort for foreign and security policy). While admittedly these are unavoidable steps, the fact is that the decision-making phase concerning the deployment of the intervention force is the one provided for in the existing treaties, which leaves open the possibility of a group of willing states activating the intervention force, giving it the green light through the use of constructive abstention. Two preliminary remarks can be made on this point.



If the EU as such is to be capable of reacting rapidly to a crisis situation, it would be necessary, however, to be clear from the beginning on the operative phase of “force generation”; either we identify, immediately, which are the operative forces and the relative assets on which the intervention force will be based, and we clarify that their mobilisation will have priority with respect to their national employment or by other multilateral structures, such as NATO, or else it is useless to maintain that we are facing a turning point. The alternative to this solution would be to endow the EU command and control structure with autonomous forces and assets from the outset, but it seems to be understood that this point has not yet been reached.

The second observation concerns the decision-making procedure. A political community (especially a community of states and citizens like the EU) cannot decide by a majority vote whether the main adversary is, hypothetically, China rather than Russia or another country. If anything, it is the operational phase following the identification of the threat that can be decided by a qualified majority or, as envisaged by the Strategic Compass, with the use of constructive abstention. The latter would seem to be a limitation, as it does not exclude the requirement of a unanimous vote by member states. However, it can reasonably be said that this is unlikely to happen in practice. It is not just the observation in the Strategic Compass that the US's interest is more in Asia than in Europe (“Its [the US] shift towards Asia is undeniable”) and that the EU therefore has to think for its own security. If a member state were to resort to a veto, and prevent another state from responding to a threat, how can it expect to be free from retaliation when it feels threatened?

The other novelty of the Strategic Compass is the timetable, which, as far as the intervention force is concerned, is tight and included in a relatively short timeframe, as the planned intermediate milestones should allow it to be operational by 2025.

In some respects, this is reminiscent of [the precedent of monetary union](#); there, too, an institutional objective (the ECB and the euro), a method and a timetable were identified. It was not an easy path then, because some governments tried to lengthen the timetable, jeopardising the objective of the single currency, and it will not be easy now either. Much will depend on the French presidency of the EU Council in the first half of next year, on the strength of the Franco-Italian axis on defence, and on the support of Germany's new government.

Our last remark concerns the partnerships envisaged in the document. There is not only a reference to NATO, but also to the OSCE, the African Union and the United Nations, as the aim is to strengthen rules based on multilateralism. In this context, the relationship with the African Union seems to be of particular importance. In fact, the planned strengthening of the European command and control structure will be based on close European coordination of the currently separate operations EUTM Mali, Takuba Task Force, EUNAVFOR Atalanta and the European Awareness Mission in the Strait of Hormuz.

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(The opinions expressed here do not necessarily represent the CSF)

