



Policy Brief

French presidency of the EU and Strategic Compass:
More EU military missions to come?



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At the beginning of 2022, France took over the rotating presidency of the European Union. With the motto 'Recovery, power, belonging', the country has put forward its vision of the next year EU agenda with a strong emphasis on EU sovereignty. "A *move from a Europe of cooperation within our borders to a powerful Europe in the world,*" is [according](#) to the French president Emmanuel Macron necessary to face the complexity of security threats, migration and hybrid warfare included. These statements and objectives do not come as a surprise; France has traditionally been a vocal supporter of more autonomous EU, especially in the area of security and defense, and has pushed for a greater military involvement of the EU around the world. Is the presidency an opportunity for France to achieve progress in this hitherto stagnant and divisive domain? And what developments can we expect concerning the CSDP operations?

The birth of Strategic Compass

To start with, it is important to stress the ongoing finalization of the main military strategic document, the Strategic Compass. This new defense doctrine will outline EU's security and defense goals for the next decade and identify threats, new partnerships and opportunities for capability development and, also, for crisis management. Produced by the EU's diplomatic service (EEAS) the document is likely to be formally approved this March and will embody the ambitions of the EU to become more confident player on the global stage.

However, Strategic Compass in its current form will not be a formula dramatically transforming the EU's current security and defense landscape. Fundamentally differing views concerning the traditional territorial defense still persist among the member states and Strategic Compass is likely to reflect the disagreements. The EU remains caught in the so-called '[either-or](#)' debate on the role of NATO in European security. Eastern European states are worried that closer EU defense cooperation would weaken the Transatlantic Bond and, consequently, their defense posture vis-à-vis Russia. French efforts to persuade more skeptical part of the EU "[not to be afraid](#)" and to advocate for a stronger Union have so far not brought significant progress. And, given the current tensions with Russia, NATO has been 'forced' to refocus back on territorial defense and scale down its out-of-area operations. The aspirations of certain member-states to make the EU 'independent' in the security domain therefore appear more and more distant. The current version of Strategic Compass reflects these tendencies, identifies NATO as Union's main security provider and mentions, arguably the buzzword, 'strategic autonomy' only once in the whole document.

CSDP, consequently, has prospects for development in different domain than in territorial defense, more specifically in the area of crisis management. CSDP operations, both civilian and military, have, arguably, been the most visible and successful articulations of European security and defense efforts so far. And indeed, the Strategic Compass in this domain sets out a number of concrete proposals to enhance this endeavor even further. Most notably, it is the creation of a joint military intervention force, named EU Rapid Deployment Capacity, which would allow for deployment of EU troops around the world during a crisis. Such an initiative, if approved, will contribute to EU's actorness and preparedness for crisis situations such as the evacuation from Afghanistan.



Despite the potential that lies in crisis management, the EU-wide consensus on this particular mechanism is rather weak and even non-NATO member-states, such as Sweden, [object](#) to its creation, mainly because of resource duplication and the fact that a similar, yet never actually deployed instrument, the EU Battlegroups, is already in place. Other critics, mainly Eastern European states, on the other hand view the possibility of more capable EU forces as a weakening element in the transatlantic relations. Moreover, a more active EU in crisis management would require also a reform of the voting procedures in CSDP, which is dominated by the unanimity principle. The Strategic Compass in this context [proposes](#) “*more flexible and rapid decision-making*”, nevertheless, a large group of member-states has already [indicated](#) that qualified majority voting in crucial security-related questions is unacceptable. In other words, a development in EU crisis management remains in the EU debate intrinsically linked to the largely divisive questions of territorial defense and reforms of voting system.

The legacy of Mali

The French presidency of the EU, despite hurdles, might bring some development in EU's crisis management and, possibly, also more deployment of EU troops abroad. As a case in point is the Portuguese presidency in first half of 2021, during which the EU [decided](#) to deploy a CSDP mission to ex-Portuguese colony Mozambique. Specifically, the training mission called EUTM Mozambique (also under Portuguese command) aims to help local security forces in their fight against Islamist insurgents in the Cabo Delgado province in the north of the country. This is an example of a presidency that, as a result of a strong national interests, heavily influenced the Council to take an action and launch CSDP operation. Can also France in a similar way create an EU-wide consensus on another mission?

When looking at possibilities of a French support for more ambitious CSDP operations, it is important to look at a crucially important country for European and French crisis management efforts - Mali, sometimes [dubbed](#) as France's Afghanistan. Firstly, there will be a lasting legacy of the French Operation Barkhane, which is now being dismantled and French troops are being sent home. Arguably, this 7-year-long campaign did not produce significant improvements in country's security landscape and, furthermore, towards the end of the engagement France has lost its support of the Malian government and also of the local population.

Secondly, the Malian government [has replaced](#) the French soldiers with Russian mercenaries of the Wagner group in its fight against jihadist terrorism in the north of the country. Not only did such swift replacement trigger a backlash from France and other Western countries, who view Wagner as Kremlin's military instrument, the cooperation of Malian security forces with these mercenaries has also put the still functioning EU engagement in the country at risk. Military training mission EUTM Mali and police training mission EUCAP will likely stay incompatible with the activities of Wagner forces, who [are accused](#) of committing war crimes and human rights violations. The EU voices calling for recalibrate its engagement in Mali are, therefore, [growing](#) louder.

Very similar development had been apparent in nearby Central African Republic where the country's government also invited Wagner soldiers to help in government's fight against rebels. As a result, the EU had to suspend its military training mission in CAR because it had become impossible not to cooperate or clash with the group. Without taking these steps of ceasing the mission's functioning, the EU would have equipped and trained local security forces, which the Russians [would have](#) consequently command over.



Towards the revision of CSDP operations

The EU has been, arguably, so far successful in launching and forging a consensus between its member-states on its military and civilian engagement around the world. However, as has been illustrated, the success of CSDP missions and further utilization of this toolbox are plagued by both internal issues, such as the disagreements on the rapid reaction force or reforms in voting system, and external developments, such as the disapproval of local populations and growing Russian involvement. The French presidency, despite its ambitions, will likely reflect these obstacles and will not push for extensive engagement abroad without substantial reasons that would have to directly threaten security of EU member-states. Instead of launching new missions, the French should use their aspirations in security and defense domain and focus on the revision of the current posture of CSDP operations.

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