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A Strategic Compass Leading Where?

The dangers of EU militarisation under French leadership

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In the shadow of Putin's revanchist war in Ukraine and its multifold consequences for Europe's security architecture, member states are developing the European Union's first full-fledged military strategy. The "Strategic Compass" championed by French President Macron – whose government currently holds the rotating presidency of the EU Council – would substantially advance the militarisation of the European Union. Swept up by domestic political calculations and Napoleon-sized ambitions, Macron's dream of "European sovereignty" might just come true, bringing with it not peace, but rather the devastating costs of more militarisation and more war.

With Russian President Vladimir Putin having launched a brutal war in Ukraine – its consequences already devastating and the extent of its damage unknown – standing up for peace is more important than ever. People across the globe show solidarity with the people of Ukraine as well as those in Russia and Belarus who oppose the war.

It is right now of essential importance to support humanitarian aid efforts, provide shelter to those who flee the war – irrespective of their origin – and take to the streets to demand peace. At the same time, it is worth looking past the daily news to see what comes next in the great power maneuverings that make conflicts like the current one become so inexorable.

This unprovoked and unjustifiable war – in violation of international law and already suspected of war crimes – poses fundamental questions about how to ensure peace and security for the people on the European continent and beyond. The European Union plays a decisive role in answering this question. In this regard, it is important to take a close look at which policy proposals are currently under discussion at the EU level. Among them is the draft for a so-called "Strategic Compass". This soon-to-be military strategy of the EU is meant to establish a common strategic vision and suggests measures to strengthen the bloc's military capabilities.

The **militarisation of the Union** has been ongoing for years, gaining significant traction after the Brexit referendum in 2016, and is likely to reach a new zenith with the Strategic Compass. If the current draft were to be adopted, it would push the EU further down the dangerous road of securing economic, trade and geostrategic interests through the show and deployment of military force.

With Putin's war raging, one might not expect to find much support for appeals to strengthen diplomacy and multilateral disarmament efforts instead of expanding military capabilities and subsidising arms producing corporations to prepare the EU for future conflicts. However, it remains crucial to question short-sighted calls in favour of the EU's military build-up. The Strategic Compass will not invest in civil conflict prevention, arms control or the EU's much-praised "Soft Power", but will, if anything, benefit the European security and arms industries. And that is no answer to the major security threats that humanity faces: destruction through nuclear war and conflicts amplified through the systemic collapse of the world's ecosystems.

In short, the Strategic Compass takes us further away from the EU we need to address the challenges we face. However, it is of vital importance for the political ambitions of French President Emmanuel Macron.

Rushing the Compass for French presidential elections

From 1 January to 30 June 2022, France holds the presidency of the Council of the EU. The presidency rotates among the member states every 6 months and grants those states holding it significant advantages in setting the EU's agenda and brokering deals that suit their national interests.

The French government envisions having the Strategic Compass endorsed by the European Council on 24 and 25 March, which will be challenging given the measure's scope and complexity. Within its four priorities to "act, secure, invest and partner", the Compass addresses geographic priorities ranging from the EU's direct neighbourhood to the Indo-Pacific, touches the EU's relationship to the US and NATO and calls for faster and more flexible decision-making on military missions under the Common Security and Defence Policy. This diversity of topics highlights the deep divisions between member states' priorities when it comes to security and defence.

As Putin's war in Ukraine currently has a strengthening effect on the NATO alliance, it will be more difficult for advocates of the Compass to accommodate concerns over EU military structures competing with NATO.

It remains questionable whether the French government will be able to craft the necessary compromises before the first round of the French presidential elections, scheduled for 10 April. As a restriction period (période de reserve) formally requires the neutrality of the French government ahead of the election, Macron and his government officials will have to secure all advances in the project by the middle of March. And Macron is desperate to do just that in order to bolster his electoral campaign.

Macron's dreams of "European sovereignty" (under French leadership, of course)

If adopted, Macron could take the Strategic Compass home as a victory in pursuit of greater European sovereignty. A sovereignty he framed as "our ability to exist in today's world to defend our values and interests"[1] at his much-noticed Sorbonne speech in 2017. Not least since then, the quest for more European sovereignty is his major European political project. With it comes European political leadership that Macron is currently claiming based on his – much coveted – conversation channels to Putin.

An adopted Compass would bolster Macron's portrayal as a successful international leader who has as well secured French interests. Indeed, French governments have been pushing the militarisation of the EU for decades already. As the French scholar Claude Serfati has noted, strengthening the EU's military power is a French interest:

"It has often been said that Europe represents "a power multiplier for French security policy" [...]. The strategy of 'power multiplier' is still only possible because France is already a top military power forging ahead of most member states. Supporting the emergence of the EU as a military power would in turn consolidate the leading position of France in that field."[2]

Being the military power in the EU in turn allows France to claim political leadership, especially within the "Franco-German tandem". France's push for EU militarisation seems to aim at leveraging its advantages in the military domain to compensate for its declining economic competitiveness towards Germany, and thus remain a leading actor in the EU integration process[3]. However, the Germany that, despite its economic and diplomatic power, restrained from taking bold military leadership is passé. The government statement[4] by German chancellor Olaf Scholz on 27 February in which he announced massive investments in the military marks an historic turning point in Germany's defence policy. The eventual scope of it remains to be seen, but it will certainly re-define the Franco-German relationship.

By pushing the military agenda enshrined in the Strategic Compass, Macron also aims to secure benefits for the French arms industry. An industry with historically close ties to the government and whose sales make France the third-biggest arms exporter world-wide. French arms companies are already on the winning side of EU militarisation, as they are on course to secure major shares of the € 8bn European Defence Fund and have already been the **biggest benefactors** of its two predecessor programmes.

Pursuing militarisation and claiming successes for the arms industry is not likely to cause backlash or public outcry in France. There exists no major opposition to this discourse in the political landscape, neither from trade unions nor big media outlets. For Macron, the claim that he leads the EU and France (after Brexit the EU's only nuclear power) to greater military power is not a risk, but an opportunity.

On the national stage, this course allows Macron to position himself as an outstandingly pro-European candidate with a concrete plan and vision that is to be continued if he was re-elected. A programme that will be enough to make him standout in the crowd of his opponents, who are either not at ease with the European topic or as it is the case for Left candidates, pushing for radical transformations for an institution designed to prevent those changes.

Paving the way for EU military interventions

In his 2017 Sorbonne speech, Macron not only shared his vision of a sovereign Europe, but also announced the European Intervention Initiative (EI2). This initiative has been France's push for joint European military interventions[5] outside EU and NATO frameworks.

Five years later, the Strategic Compass draft entails the goal of building an EU rapid response capability to deploy up to 5.000 military personnel to deal with various types of crises. The document subsequently calls for more flexibility in decision-making when it comes to deployment. It suggests using the options of Article 44 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) to create a coalition of the willing through "constructive abstention". In short, this would prevent smaller member states from halting EU military operations while allowing France and Germany effective veto power. This would facilitate EU military interventions through circumventing the deep divisions between the Western and Southern and the Central and Eastern member states when it comes to geographic priorities, while keeping France and Germany ultimately in control.

It comes in handy for those pushing for EU military interventions that the Strategic Compass ignores the consequences of the Afghanistan and Mali military missions. The only conclusion to the Afghanistan disaster one can find in the draft document is that the EU needs its own military force to evacuate its citizens. This can be translated into preventing dependence on the US in case of emergency, a takeaway from the recent Afghanistan mission that fits the French agenda: first, by casting no doubt on the goals of Western military interventions, including Mali, the "French Afghanistan"[6]; second, by using failures as a pretext to gain independence from the US; and third, by arguing for reaching such independence by subsidising the European (and French) arms industries to equip the military for interventions under own control.

Access to resources and markets

In light of the current developments, it seems obvious what the EU is supposed to use its military power for: Deterrence and guaranteeing the capability of EU member states to defend themselves. However, the militarisation of the EU has been progressing for years and we should not overlook the stated mid- to long-term goals.

The strategic assessment of the Compass draft describes an EU surrounded by instability and conflict within a conflictual multipolar world. Power politics have returned to the global stage, and access to space, sea routes and critical resources are increasingly contested. Emphasis is placed on China, an "economic competitor and systemic rival" whose development is forecasted to define this century. Member of the European Parliament Özlem Demirel of the German DIE LINKE regards this primarily as an "imperialist confrontation that is now being underpinned by military capabilities, deterrence and armament"[7].

The Compass draft pushes the EU to defend and expand access to resources and markets with increasing military force. This poses great risks for the EU. It increases the potential for unwanted escalation and directs utterly needed attention and resources away from addressing the daily material security needs of those living in- and outside the bloc.

However, many member states do not share the French ambitions that are reflected in the Compass draft. Even if a – possibly less ambitious – Strategic Compass is adopted eventually, there will remain many fault lines and contradictions. Most profoundly, a more militarised EU will not strengthen its role as a diplomatic power to build a new European security architecture based on shared rules, diplomacy and cooperation. The EU will have a hard time being a military actor in the global arms race and a trusted negotiator at the same time. De-escalation, civil conflict-prevention measures and multilateral disarmament efforts, as opposed to ever-growing defence budgets, are more needed than ever.

Furthermore, in face of the economic and social costs of the ongoing pandemic, social movements and trade unions are rightfully demanding investments in public infrastructure and the health and welfare systems. Member states' governments will have to choose between social and military priorities. It will depend on how much pressure they feel to propose measures to meaningfully meet people's daily needs in face of the economic, social and climate challenges that lie ahead of us.

Building up and using military power will, if at all, only buy time at the cost of human suffering. It is up to us – those who believe that the world is over-armed and peace is underfunded – to make use of these fault lines to advance peaceful and social solutions.

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[2] Ingar Solty, Claude Serfati, Judith Dellheim: Sicherheitspolitik Contra Sicherheit, p. 55. Available at: **https://www.rosalux.de/fileadmin/rls_uploads/pdfs/Manuskripte/Manuskripte_24_Sicherheitspolitik.pdf** (last accessed: 14.02.2022).

[3] Ibid.

[4] Policy statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and Member of the German Bundestag, 27 February 2022 in Berlin. Available at: **https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/policy-statement-by-olaf-scholz-chancellor-of-the-federal-republic-of-germany-and-member-of-the-german-bundestag-27-february-2022-in-berlin-2008378** (last accessed: 04.03.2022).

[5] Participating states are: Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

[6] Christophe Ayad: Le Mali est notre Afghanistan. Le Monde, 16 November 2017.

[7] Neues Deutschland: Es geht um Ressourcen und Märkte. Available at: **https://www.nd-aktuell.de/artikel/1158532.militarisierung-der-eu-es-geht-um-ressourcen-und-maerkte.html?sstr=özlem|demirel** (last accessed: 14.02.2022).

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