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# THE EU STRATEGIC COMPASS AND TÜRKİYE: A MISSED OPPORTUNITY IN DEFENCE COOPERATION

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# The EU Strategic Compass and Türkiye: A Missed Opportunity in Defence Cooperation

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The long-awaited “Strategic Compass” document<sup>1</sup> was formally approved by the EU Foreign Affairs Council on 21 March 2022 and endorsed by the European Council at the end of March. The Strategic Compass aims to steer the course of EU’s security and defence policies in the next five to ten years. Two years in the making, the Strategic Compass comes at an overly critical moment when great power competition has intensified, the core tenets of the rules-based international order are under attack and the European security architecture is undergoing a profound transformation due to Russia’s war on Ukraine.

Unlike its predecessors, the 2003 European Security Strategy and the 2016 EU Global Strategy, the Strategic Compass is not just a strategy document, but also a guide for action with timetables and concrete deliverables. Moreover, the fact that the Strategic Compass was borne out of a process led by EU capitals increases the hope that the Member States will be more willing to implement the identified actions. Dubbed as “part strategy, part action guide”<sup>2</sup>, the document includes a detailed action plan consisting of more than fifty actions to be fulfilled over the next five years. It is important to note that the document has undergone six revisions since the presentation of the first draft in November 2021 and the language on Russia has been substantially toughened at the request of the Baltic states and Poland. A major novelty regarding the Strategic Compass has to do with the fact that it includes the first-ever EU-wide threat assessment which is regarded as a significant step on the path to a common strategic culture.

## Four Pillars of the Strategic Compass

In an era of raw power politics, the Strategic Compass aims to boost the EU’s role as a security provider and to equip it with the ability to think and act strategically building on the following four pillars: Act, Secure, Invest, Partner. In order to improve the EU’s ability to act swiftly and robustly in the face of crises, the Strategic Compass proposes the creation of an “EU Rapid Deployment Capacity” consisting of 5,000 troops by 2025, which is the most striking initiative in the document. This force is an evolution of the EU Battlegroups consisting of 1,500 troops which despite reaching full operational readiness in 2007 have never been deployed mainly due to lack of political will. In contrast with the

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<sup>1</sup> See “A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence - For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security”, March 2022, at [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic\\_compass\\_en3\\_web.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic_compass_en3_web.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Amanda Paul, et. al, “Will the Strategic Compass be a game-changer for EU security and defence?”, *EPC Round-Up*, 5 April 2022, European Policy Centre. Retrieved from <https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/Will-the-Strategic-Compass-be-a-game-changer-for-EU-security-and-defen~479820> on 14 November 2022.



Battlegroups, the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity will be modular and consist of air, land and maritime components to be deployed in different operational scenarios. The incorporation of strategic enablers is another novelty for this flexible, modular force which will increase its readiness through EU-wide regular live exercises.

Moreover, in order to bolster the EU's ability to act in the face of crises, the document underlines the necessity to reinforce Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions and operations through a more rapid and flexible decision-making process. This implies mobilising the Treaty provisions providing for flexibility and differentiated integration in CSDP such as forming *ad hoc* "coalitions of the willing" and the use of "constructive abstention" enshrined in Articles 44 and 31 of the Lisbon Treaty. Increasing financial solidarity, military mobility and developing the capacity to station 200 fully equipped civilian experts in conflict areas within 30 days by mid-2023 form the other actions foreseen under this pillar.

Under the second pillar, which focuses on improving the EU's ability to deter and respond to the rapidly evolving nature of threats, the document concentrates on boosting the EU's ability in countering hybrid and cyber threats. To this end, various "toolboxes" combining different instruments in a more coordinated manner are to be developed.

Based on the understanding that EU's collective ambition to become a more robust security provider should be matched with adequate resources, the Strategic Compass includes a pledge by Member States to substantially increase their defence spending and invest more in disruptive technologies, under the third pillar. The changing threat perceptions in the wake of Russia's war on Ukraine, has led numerous EU capitals such as Berlin, Copenhagen and Warsaw to announce vast defence budgets and more Member States are expected to follow suit. At a time when the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to put pressure on national budgets, EU's recent defence initiatives such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF) have become more important than ever. The Strategic Compass puts forward proposals such as VAT exemption and a bonus system to encourage joint capability development and joint procurement to encourage making full use of these instruments.

Finally, the fourth pillar focuses on strengthening cooperation with long-standing strategic partners such as NATO, UN and regional organisations including the OSCE and ASEAN as well as developing tailored bilateral partnerships with like-minded countries and strategic partners such as the US, the UK and Norway. Establishing tailored partnerships with Western Balkan countries as well as southern and eastern neighbours through enhanced dialogue and promoting participation in CSDP missions is described as another priority in this regard.



## The Strategic Compass and Türkiye

The document's position on Türkiye highlights the dichotomy between the short-term interests of certain Member States and the collective interests of the EU in the EU's effort to set a long-term strategic vision. Given Türkiye's status as an EU candidate country and a key NATO Ally and the significant role Ankara has been playing as a mediator between Moscow and Kyiv, the way the document refers to Türkiye is quite problematic and difficult to comprehend.

Türkiye is mentioned in two sections in the Strategic Compass, firstly in a rather negative light in the context of the Eastern Mediterranean where the strategic environment in the "Euro-Mediterranean" region is analysed and secondly in the section on bilateral partnerships as a cooperation partner with long-standing contributions to CSDP missions and operations.

In the former section, the Strategic Compass makes the following observations concerning the security environment in the Eastern Mediterranean:

"Finally, tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean remain, due to provocations and unilateral actions against EU Member States and violations of sovereign rights in breach of international law, as well as the instrumentalisation of irregular migration, and have the potential to escalate quickly; ensuring a stable and secure environment as well as a cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship, in line with the principle of good neighbourly relations, is in the interest of both the EU and Turkey."<sup>3</sup>

The language adopted in this section reflects the claims and the position of Greece and the Greek Cypriot Administration and points the finger at Ankara for the tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean. Since the presentation of the first draft of the Strategic Compass in November 2021, there were reports that two countries (i.e. Greece and the Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus) had been engaged in heavy lobbying for Türkiye to be explicitly portrayed as a threat in the section describing the challenges to EU's security.<sup>4</sup> What is really unfortunate is that unilateral claims and baseless accusations by these two countries have found themselves a place in an EU strategy document.

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<sup>3</sup> European External Action Service, "A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence", March 2022, p. 19. Retrieved from [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic\\_compass\\_en3\\_web.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic_compass_en3_web.pdf) on 18 November 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Alexandra Brzozowski, "EU defence ministers welcome bloc's military blueprint but hesitations remain", *Euractiv*, 17 November 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/eu-defence-ministers-welcome-blocs-military-blueprint-but-hesitations-remain/> on 18 November 2022.



In the section on partnerships, the document expresses the EU's aspiration to deepen its bilateral partnership with like-minded countries sharing its core values namely the US, the UK, Norway, Canada and Japan. Although the document mentions Türkiye later in this section, the fact that Türkiye is not categorised among this first group of countries which are depicted as EU's preferred strategic partners, raises fundamental questions regarding the way in which Türkiye is viewed by Brussels.

In yet another omission, the document makes no mention of Türkiye's status as an accession candidate, nor of its position as a long-standing NATO Ally with invaluable contributions to Euro-Atlantic security. The kind of partnership the EU would like to develop with Türkiye is defined in the Strategic Compass as follows:

“With Turkey, a contributor to CSDP missions and operations, we will continue to cooperate in areas of common interest. We remain committed to developing a mutually beneficial partnership, but this requires equal commitment on Turkey's side to advance on a path of cooperation, sustained de-escalation and to address EU concerns, in accordance with the statement of the members of the European Council of 25 March 2021.”<sup>5</sup>

While underlining the EU's determination to build a partnership with Türkiye based on mutual benefits, the Strategic Compass signals that from the EU's perspective this would ultimately depend on Ankara's performance in easing the tension in the Eastern Mediterranean and addressing the EU's concerns in this regard. Maintaining its distorted portrayal of Türkiye as the party responsible for the tension in the Eastern Mediterranean in this section, the document reconfirms that the nature of the EU's engagement with Ankara would be conditional upon its ability to defuse the tension in the Eastern Mediterranean. Moreover, the reference to the European Council Statement of 25 March 2021 makes a nod to the “phased, proportional and reversible” approach to guide EU's future engagement with Türkiye in areas of common interest.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Strategic Compass and the View from Ankara**

Unsurprisingly, the fact that the section on the Eastern Mediterranean was written with a language reflecting Greek and Greek Cypriot claims, has triggered strong criticism from Ankara. The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in a statement issued on 22 March 2022, noted that this section “seems to have been dictated by the Greek and Greek Cypriot duo

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<sup>5</sup> European External Action Service, “A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence”, March 2022, p. 56. Retrieved from [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic\\_compass\\_en3\\_web.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic_compass_en3_web.pdf) on 18 November 2022.

<sup>6</sup> European Council, “Statement of the Members of the European Council”, SN 18/21, 25 March 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/48976/250321-vtc-euco-statement-en.pdf>, p.6 on 17 November 2022.



who have maximalist maritime boundary claims at the expense and persistent denial of the rights of Türkiye and the Turkish Cypriots.”<sup>7</sup> Criticising this section for being disconnected from reality, and contravening with international law, practice and the EU *acquis*, the statement warned that the approach evident in the document risked making the EU part of the problem rather than the solution in the Eastern Mediterranean. Given the Strategic Compass’ failure to point the right direction, the Turkish Foreign Ministry went on to say that in its current form, the document could be perceived neither as a “compass” nor as “strategic.” Finally, referring to the document’s failure to acknowledge the critical role Ankara has assumed as a mediator between Moscow and Kyiv in the context of the Ukraine crisis, “Taking into account the latest developments, it is unfortunate and non-visionary for the EU that the document misses the truth and reality and sees a candidate country and a NATO Ally from such a shallow perspective”, the statement noted.<sup>8</sup>

It is very unfortunate that a document, intended to provide long-term guidance and a strategic vision to EU’s defence and security policies, has once again become hostage to the unilateral claims of certain Member States. Had it been designed with a more objective and balanced approach regarding Türkiye, the Strategic Compass could have been a game-changer by bolstering Türkiye-EU cooperation in the security domain at an overly critical time when war has returned to Europe. Not only could it present concrete opportunities for revitalising Türkiye-EU relations which would ultimately contribute to the deepening of NATO-EU cooperation – one of the stated objectives of the Strategic Compass, but it could also reinforce the EU’s global actorness. In its present form however, the document represents a missed opportunity in all these respects.

The EU has become increasingly critical of Türkiye’s recent foreign policy choices. The European Commission, in its latest annual country report assessing Türkiye’s progress in meeting the accession criteria noted that the foreign policy priorities of the two actors continued to collide over the past year, citing Türkiye’s military operations in Iraq and Syria and Ankara’s failure to align with the EU sanctions regime targeting Russia.<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that this points to a major lack of understanding regarding Türkiye’s position *vis-à-vis* the Russia-Ukraine war. The fact that Türkiye’s lack of alignment with the EU’s restrictive measures against Russia is viewed in a critical light whereas its mediation efforts and particularly its crucial role in brokering the landmark grain corridor deal between Moscow and Kyiv are hailed presents a contradiction on the part of the EU,

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<sup>7</sup> Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “No: 98, 22 March 2022, Press Release Regarding the “Strategic Compass” Document Approved by the EU”. Retrieved from [https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no\\_-98\\_-ab-tarafindan-onaylanan-stratejik-pusula-baslikli-belge-hk.en.mfa](https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-98_-ab-tarafindan-onaylanan-stratejik-pusula-baslikli-belge-hk.en.mfa) on 17 November 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> European Commission, “Türkiye 2022 Report”, Brussels, 12 October 2022 SWD (2022) 333 final, p. 125. Retrieved from [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/ccedfba1-0ea4-4220-9f94-ae50c7fd0302\\_en?filename=T%C3%BCrkiye%20Report%202022.pdf](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/ccedfba1-0ea4-4220-9f94-ae50c7fd0302_en?filename=T%C3%BCrkiye%20Report%202022.pdf) on 16 November 2022.



in the sense that it is thanks to Ankara's non-alignment with Western sanctions targeting Russia that has equipped it with the capacity to mediate between the two warring parties. Pursuing a balanced course between the West and Russia, has enabled Ankara to maintain channels of communication between the parties open. With no foreseeable end in sight to the Russia-Ukraine war, the EU and US have been mounting pressure on Türkiye for joining the sanctions. The Turkish Foreign Ministry has responded to allegations regarding sanctions by reminding its long-standing policy of only implementing UN-backed sanctions and its firm policy of not allowing Türkiye to become a channel to evade sanctions.<sup>10</sup>

Despite its vast potential, Türkiye's prospective participation in PESCO projects has been another area which has suffered from vetoes. The Greek and Greek Cypriot duo<sup>11</sup> plus Austria<sup>12</sup> have voiced opposition to Türkiye's request to take part in PESCO projects. In May 2021, Türkiye had formally applied to be included in the Dutch-led Military Mobility project under PESCO, which aims at easing and standardising the procedures for cross-border mobility of military personnel and equipment and is thus seen vital for EU-NATO cooperation. The US, Canada and Norway were the first non-EU countries which received a green light to join the project in May 2021. Earlier this month, despite initial reluctance towards PESCO, the UK became the latest third country invited to join the Military Mobility project.<sup>13</sup> However, Türkiye's request to participate in the project is yet to receive a positive answer. It is important to note that Türkiye's involvement in PESCO was also among the key points addressed in the 10-point Trilateral Memorandum enabling Ankara to lift its veto on the NATO bids of Sweden and Finland. Under the Memorandum, Helsinki and Stockholm committed "to support the fullest possible involvement of Türkiye and other non-EU Allies in the existing and prospective initiatives of the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy, including Türkiye's participation in the PESCO Project on Military Mobility."<sup>14</sup> It remains to be seen whether the two Nordic

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<sup>10</sup> Henry Foy, Sam Fleming, James Politi and Laura Pitel, "US and EU step up pressure on Turkey over Russia sanctions", *Financial Times*, 15 September 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.ft.com/content/95243a73-22c8-447e-bbae-a10a206d7e9e> on 16 November 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Alexandra Brzozowski, "Turkey's participation request in EU military project apprehended as 'Trojan horse'", *Euractiv*, 17 May 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/turkeys-participation-request-in-eu-military-project-apprehended-as-trojan-horse/> on 23 November 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Oliver Noyan, "Austria opposes Turkey's bid to join EU military project", *Euractiv*, 27 July 2021. Retrieved from [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/austria-opposes-turkeys-bid-to-join-eu-military-project/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/austria-opposes-turkeys-bid-to-join-eu-military-project/) on 23 November 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Council of the European Union, "PESCO: the UK will be invited to participate in Military Mobility Project", 15 November 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/11/15/pesco-the-uk-will-be-invited-to-participate-in-military-mobility-project/> on 23 November 2022.

<sup>14</sup> NATO, "Trilateral Memorandum", 28 June 2022, Madrid. Retrieved from [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/220628-trilat-memo.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/220628-trilat-memo.pdf) on 23 November 2022.



states would be able to talk some sense into the countries opposing Türkiye's involvement in the project.

## **Conclusion**

Both Türkiye and the EU have a lot to gain from closer cooperation in the security and defence domain, a fact further accentuated by the changing geopolitical environment and threat perceptions in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine war. Although the Russia-Ukraine war is described as a watershed moment which has triggered the EU's geopolitical awakening, the EU has so far been missing out on the chance to capitalize on its relations with Türkiye. For this to happen, rather than bowing to pressure from Greece and the Greek Cypriot Administration and allowing bilateral disputes determine the level of EU cooperation with Ankara in the security and defence domains, the EU should embrace a balanced and nuanced approach vis-à-vis Türkiye. It should be taken into consideration that Türkiye is a key player in the European security scene and also a candidate to join the EU. The EU lacks a deep understanding of Turkey's interests and viewpoint in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean regions. A more balanced and nuanced approach to the Cyprus and Aegean issues could also step up the EU's role in the region as an honest broker and security provider. Finally, the EU should invest energy in overcoming the obstacles to Ankara's participation in PESCO projects as Türkiye could provide substantial added value to these and contribute significantly to the EU's emergence as a geopolitical actor.

