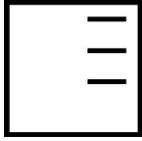


EU Monitor

The European Army project:
the answer to the Union's
strategic shrinkage?

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Introduction

The retreat of European troops together with the American forces during the Afghanistan evacuation, alongside the French missiles crisis and more recently the conflict in Belarus, have once again called the European Union's defence capabilities in question. As the debate on the Union's defence strategy is becoming more and more salient, VP/HR Josep Borrell has made the strong assessment that "Europe is in danger", at risk of a "strategic shrinkage".¹

In the last years, the recognition of the Union's shortcomings in its defence strategy and its lack of military capabilities has nurtured the debate on the EU's "strategic autonomy".² This expression is used conversely with "strategic sovereignty", almost making it a catch-all term.³ Hence, it is crucial to specifically define what is meant by "strategic autonomy". Here, it is interpreted as per the Council of the European Union's conclusions of November 2016, which define strategic autonomy as the "capacity to act autonomously when and where necessary and with partners wherever possible".⁴ The prominence of strategic autonomy for the Union was moreover mentioned in the EU's *Global Strategy*,⁵ which aims at paving the way for the Union's resilience to strategic challenges. Whilst strategic autonomy is not solely limited to the

¹ See, for instance: Borrell, J. (2021, November 12). A Strategic Compass for Europe. Retrieved November 12, 2021, from <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/eu-strategic-compass-by-josep-borrell-2021-11>.

² Borrell, J. (2020, December 3). Why European strategic autonomy matters. Retrieved November 1, 2021, from https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/89865/why-european-strategic-autonomy-matters_en.

³ Mauro, F. (2018). Strategic autonomy: the new Grail of European Defence. Retrieved November 1, 2021, from <https://grip.org/strategic-autonomy-the-new-grail-of-european-defense/>.

⁴ 14149/16.

⁵ EEAS. (2016). Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe - A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy. Retrieved November 1, 2021, from https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf.





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field of defence,⁶ this paper will bring a focus to this particular domain as it considerably shapes the EU's capacities in its external relations.

Moreover, whilst the EU has developed several tools in the domains of defence and security, they do not appear sufficient to give the Union the means to fulfil its strategic ambitions.⁷ Indeed, the most resembling corps to a European army currently existing, FRONTEX, an agency responsible for the EU's border control, does not appear strong enough to fulfil the Unions' security ambitions. Indeed, whilst it allows the EU to act in its close neighborhood, it does not permit a broader military independence – on which would rely the Union's strategic autonomy. Furthermore, the Member States' lack of political will to use defence tools to their full potential undermines their effectiveness and does not help building up the Union's military potential. For instance, Member States have become less inclined in participating in CSDP missions.⁸ As a consequence, the Union is yet to fill its capability shortfalls.⁹ As the intergovernmentalist approach in the EU's defence policy is increasingly identified as a cause of its inefficiency,¹⁰ the idea that a supranationalist project might contribute to strengthening the EU's strategic autonomy has emerged. Therefore, in the last months, VP/HR Josep Borrell has fostered the idea that creating a European army may be a way to resolve the EU's "strategic shrinkage" in the field of defence and security. This paper

⁶ As highlighted by G. Grevi for the European Policy Centre (2020), strategic autonomy is often related to "trade and investment to innovation, the single market or security and defence".

⁷ On this topic, see, for instance: Csernatosi, R. (2020, June 11). EU Security and Defense Challenges: Toward a European Defense Winter? Retrieved November 20, 2021, from <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2020/06/11/eu-security-and-defense-challenges-toward-european-defense-winter-pub-82032>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Mölling, C., & Schütz, T. (2020, November). The EU's Strategic Compass and its four baskets. DGAP. Retrieved November 21, 2021, from <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/eus-strategic-compass-and-its-four-baskets>.

¹⁰ Bergmann, J., & Müller, P. (2021). Failing forward in the EU's common security and defence policy: The integration of EU crisis management. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 28(10), 1669–1687.





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will assess this statement, and examine whether the ideal of European strategic autonomy can be materialised through the creation of a European Army.

Refreshing a 70 years-old aspiration

As mentioned previously, the forced retreat of European troops alongside the American forces during the Afghanistan evacuation has once again brought up the idea of a European Army in Brussels. As underlined by J. Borrell, the European Union was unable to mobilise common forces to secure the Kabul airport as its American ally did, which highlighted the Union's capability shortfalls.¹¹ It should, however, be noted that it was far from being the first time that the aspiration to a European Army has been put forward by Europe's political leaders. Indeed, the first proposal for a European Army dates back to the 1950s: the Pleven Plan aimed at creating a European Defence Community (EDC), but this supranational project was never completed due to the refusal of the French National Assembly to ratify the treaty in 1954.

According to Luuk van Middelaar,¹² the "taboo on creating a European Army", inherited from the 1954 failure, was lifted in 1992, as Member States recognised that "foreign policy might in time lead to a common defence".¹³ Furthermore, it could be stated that the idea of a stronger common defence policy has become more prevalent since the signing of the Lisbon Treaty. As Member States became obligated to support one another in the event that they would be victims of an armed aggression or terrorist attack,¹⁴ it has increasingly been argued that the EU would benefit from having a unified armed corps.

¹¹ Boffey, D. (2021, September 2). US withdrawal from Afghanistan will lead to EU army, says top diplomat. The Guardian. Retrieved November 1, 2021, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/02/us-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-will-lead-to-eu-army-says-top-diplomat>.

¹² Van Middelaar, L. (2014). The passage to Europe: how a continent became a union. Yale University Press. p.194.

¹³ Art. B and art. J.7(1) EU (Maastricht version).

¹⁴ As per the Mutual defence clause (Article 42.7 of the Treaty on the European Union) and the Solidarity clause (Article 222 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union).





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Furthermore, it should be noted that the idea of building an EU Army has become more widespread since the late 2010s, as Jean-Claude Juncker put the European Army project forward during his presidency of the European Commission.¹⁵ Since then, other European leaders have taken position in favour of such ambitious defence project. Indeed, in the last few years, we have witnessed the revival of the idea of a strong Europe of defence incarnated by a European Army. For instance, one may recall the French call for a "true European Army" made by Emmanuel Macron in 2018, an ambition supported by German chancellor Angela Merkel.¹⁶ Nonetheless, in over seven decades of political debate over the topic, the European Army project has not manifested itself except in rhetoric. This begs the question of the actual feasibility of such a project. Hence, if the plan to create a European Army has failed so far, why would it become a reality now?

Shaping the EU's defence policy through the "politics of event"

Thus far, it would seem that the EU has solely answered to major external security crises with "incomplete institutional reforms" of its defence tools — notably the CSDP.¹⁷ It could, however, be argued that the recent shifts in the world's geopolitical context makes it possible for the European Army project to come to completion. In his Memoirs (1976), Jean Monnet wrote that "Europe will be forged through crises and it will be the sum of the solutions brought to these crises". The last decades proved Monnet right: the EU has been known to rule under the

¹⁵ See, for instance: Juncker, J.-C. (2017). In defence of Europe. European Commission. Prague. Retrieved November 21, 2021, from https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/SPEECH_17_1581.

¹⁶ Merkel, A. (2018, November 2018). Speech to the European Parliament. Retrieved December 4, 2021, from https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/debate-on-future-of-europe-with-angela-merkel-german-federal-chancellor_9602_pk.

¹⁷ Bergmann, J., & Müller, P. (2021). Failing forward in the EU's common security and defence policy: The integration of EU crisis management. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 28(10), 1669–1687.





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"politics of event",¹⁸ meaning that the Union is driven to act and to strengthen cooperation between Member States when facing a major crisis. As an example, the subprime crisis has prompted Member States to strengthen cooperation in financial matters: they set up the European fund in 2010 and adopted the banking pact in 2012.

Therefore, VP/HR Josep Borrell sustains that the aforementioned logic of ruling under the "politics of event" could push the Union to adopt a bolder common defence strategy. In his words, "We know that Europe often only reacts when faced with emergencies — be it an economic crisis, a social crisis like during the pandemic or a security crisis".¹⁹ Correspondingly, the European External Action Service (EEAS) has argued that the Union's leaders "need to increase our capacity and willingness to act and strengthen our resilience".²⁰ Indeed, the EEAS stresses that the EU's current security environment has grown more hostile; the "return to power politics" and the instability of the EU's neighbourhood notably appear of great concern. Hence, recent geopolitical shifts could be the "event" pushing the EU towards deeper integration in the field of defence and security.

For instance, the fear over the feeble EU's defence capacities is heightened by the isolationist turn the United States (US) have recently undertaken.²¹ As advanced by Justyna Gorkowska, researcher at the Centre for Eastern Studies, it is likely that "The US will no longer be engaged in large-scale military operations in Africa and the Middle East, and will leave to

¹⁸ Van Middelaar, L. (2020). *Alarums et excursions: Improvising politics on the European stage*. (L. Waters, Trans.). Agenda Publishing.

¹⁹ Fubini, F. (2021, November 30). Borrell: Afghanistan was a catastrophe. Europe must share responsibility. *Corriere Della Sera*. Retrieved November 31, 2021, from https://www.corriere.it/english/21_agosto_30/borrell-afghanistan-was-catastrophe-europe-must-share-responsibility-3c8a0f46-08f2-11ec-92ce-f1aac6dc2317.shtml?refresh_ce.

²⁰ EEAS (2021) 1169.

²¹ The Editorial Board. (2021, August 20). Afghanistan and the cycles of American interventionism. *The Financial Times*. Retrieved November 2, 2021, from <https://www.ft.com/content/4f31f9ea-e8c3-4d3c-b670-b187b4669555>.





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Europe crisis and conflict resolution in the European neighbourhood".²² Hence, the EU would be less and less able to rely on its allies and would therefore have to develop its own defence capabilities — therefore reaching a certain level of strategic autonomy. In the words of President Macron, "We need a Europe that is increasingly able to defend itself by itself – and without solely depending on the US". Thus, having European armed forces ready to answer to EU command could help strengthening the Union's autonomy in its external relations.

Divergent policies, convergent interests?

Nonetheless, whilst the leaders of the European institutions do recognise the need for a stronger European defence, they do not seem to believe the best way to achieve it is through the creation of a European Army. As an example, in his State of Europe Address, European Council president Charles Michel declared that "We [European leaders] are often asked the question: will Europe one day have its own European army? The prospect exists. But in any case, we all know it wouldn't be for tomorrow".²³ Similarly, Ursula von der Leyen, when mentioning the Union's defence capabilities in her State of the Union Address,²⁴ chose not to mention the idea of a European Army. She called for the elaboration of a "Europe of defence", a rather vague term. The EU Army project increasingly appears as an ideal rather than a foreseeable realisation. Besides, whilst the European Army project is increasingly mentioned, political leaders rarely define what

²² Gotkowska, J. (2021, August 14). USA – Germany – NATO's eastern flank. Transformation of the US military presence in Europe. Centre for Eastern studies. Retrieved November 2, 2021, from <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2020-08-14/usa-germany-natos-eastern-flank-transformation-us-military>.

²³ Michel, C. (2021, November 9). State of Europe - Speech at the Berlin Conference. Retrieved December 2, 2021, from <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/11/09/the-state-of-europe-speech-by-president-charles-michel-at-the-berlin-conference-2021/>.

²⁴ Von der Leyen, U. (2021, September 16). State of the Union Address. Retrieved December 2, 2021, from https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/ov/SPEECH_21_4701.





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this army would be²⁵: the EU Army project appears as a "tool of politics" rather than a "tool of defence".²⁶ Hence, it would appear that other paths to reach its strategic autonomy will have to be considered.

In the aforementioned address, Ursula von der Leyen contended that, as pertaining to European defence, "What has held us back until now is not just a shortfall of capacity – it is the lack of political will". The European Commission President has highlighted the main shortfall for the Union's strategic autonomy: the lack of political ambition for a comprehensive defence policy. Developing a common defence strategy would mean that Member States would pool their strategic interests, which are divergent.²⁷ Without the definition of a set pool of common interests, it seems unlikely that Member States will agree to an ambitious defence project such as a European Army. As M. Ciulla and T. Varma demonstrate, whilst the French have been pushing for the creation of an European Defence Union,²⁸ several Member States "still need to be convinced" of the need of a European strategic autonomy in the field of defence.²⁹ As a consequence, the "europeanisation of security interests" remains scarce:³⁰ defence and security primarily stand as national concerns. Sharing armed forces would suppose that Member States have pooled their strategic interests in order to conduct external and internal actions. However, this ambition that has not yet been reached. If it had, the intergovernmentalist tools at the

²⁵ Franke, U. (2018, December 3). The "European army", a tale of willful misunderstanding. Retrieved November 22, 2021, from https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_european_army_a_tale_of_wilful_misunderstanding/.

²⁶ Morillas, P. (2015, March). Junckers' EU army: a tool of politics more than defence. Retrieved December 1, 2021, from https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/opinion/europa/juncker_s_eu_army_a_tool_of_politics_more_than_defence.

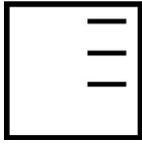
²⁷ For instance, see: Lehne, S. (2017, December 5). Is There Hope for EU Foreign Policy? Retrieved November 21, 2021, from <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2017/12/05/is-there-hope-for-eu-foreign-policy-pub-74909>.

²⁸ This expression seems to echo President Macron's "Europe de la défense".

²⁹ Ciulla, M., & Varma, T. (2021, January 6). The lonely leader: The origins of France's strategy for EU foreign policy. Retrieved November 8, 2021, from <https://ecfr.eu/article/the-lonely-leader-the-origins-of-frances-strategy-for-eu-foreign-policy/>.

³⁰ Simon, E. (2021, March). Multiple security threats, multiple threats, one European response? Retrieved December 3, 2021, from <https://www.iris-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Analyse-11-Multiple-security-interests-March-2021-.pdf>.





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Member States disposition would have been used more frequently (namely the CSDP). Hence, before an actual European Army can come to completion, the Union need to specifically define what the entire European community's strategic interests can be.

If not an army, then a battalion?

It has been widely argued that the European Union needs a stronger politico-military guidance than the one proposed in the aforementioned EU Global Strategy (EUGS).³¹ By defining what it aims at achieving, the Union will be setting common goals — and therefore define a more concrete security strategy. All in all, the first step in achieving strategic autonomy is to determine where the Union wants to stand on the world stage. As to allow the EU to develop a united stance on security and defence, VP/HR J. Borrell has been tasked by the Council of the European Union in June 2020 to present a Strategic Compass for the Union.³² It has been expected that it will be able to "fill the voids" of the EUGS.³³ It is a significant initiative in that it aims at providing the Union with a clearer vision of its common security interests that will lead to a more coherent security policy for the EU.

J. Borrell has pushed for the consideration of making defence-related matters decisions by activating provisions such as "constructive abstention or Article 44, which allows for the

³¹ Biscop, S. (2019, December). From Global Strategy to Strategic Compass: Where Is the EU Heading? Retrieved December 1, 2021, from <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/from-global-strategy-to-strategic-compass-where-is-the-eu-heading/>.

³² The Compass should be adopted in the first half of 2022, during the French Presidency of the Council. J. Borrell has introduced the project to the Council in November 2021.

³³ Engberg, K. (2021, January). A European Defence Union by 2025? Retrieved November 22, 2021, from https://www.sieps.se/globalassets/publikationer/temasidor/european_defence_union_policy_overview.pdf.





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creation of coalitions approved by the European Council".³⁴ Hence, he offers to go beyond inter-governmentality — underlying that this logic may have hindered the Union's progress in achieving strategic autonomy thus far. Moreover, J. Borrell has proposed to create the "EU Rapid Deployment Capacity", a joint military force of 5000 troops — the size of a battalion. Whilst such military corps does not constitute an equivalent of a European Army, it could be argued that this kind of program could greatly heighten the EU's defence capabilities. It would provide the Union with a strike force that can act beyond its borders for crisis management missions that would not rely on its military allies.

Furthermore, as argued by Eckhard Lübke, "Multilateral units and common capabilities could increasingly complement national units, thus becoming the growing nucleus of a single European Army".³⁵ Added to the work of the FRONTEX agency, this task force would help building the EU's common defence capabilities. Therefore, the Strategic Compass could constitute a first step towards the creation of a European Army. Indeed, it clearly defines the Member States' common security interests as well as setting out concrete ways to protect them. Nonetheless, it must be underlined that whilst this force would boost the EU's "capacity to act", i.e., its capacity to initiative common military action, it would not enhance its "capability to decide"³⁶, the capacity to use that force. The definition of practicable decision-making must be considered during the adoption of the *Compass* in March 2022.

³⁴ Borrell, J. (2021, November 16). A strategic compass for Europe. Retrieved November 21, 2021, from <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/a-strategic-compass-for-europe/>.

³⁵ Lübke, E. (2021, February 3). Standing on Our Own Feet? - Opportunities and Risks of European Self-Defence. Retrieved December 2, 2021, from <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2021RP01/>.

³⁶ As per the reasoning deployed in : Mauro, F. (2021, October). Europe's strategic autonomy: that obscure object of desire. Retrieved December 28, 2021, from <https://www.iris-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/EN-ANALYSIS-13-EUROPE'S-STRATEGIC-AUTONOMY-October-2021.pdf>.





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Conclusion

It can be concluded that at least on the short term, creating a European Army is not the right path to follow to fulfil the Union's defence ambitions. The European Army project seems to be thought of as a long-term ambition, whilst reaching strategic autonomy appears as a goal to reach swiftly. On that account, the adoption of J. Borrell's Strategic Compass presents the Union with a definition of common defence goals, and even more importantly, with precise ways to achieve them. It could therefore be argued that the *Strategic Compass* can lead the Union to enhance its strategic autonomy and could be as a first step towards the completion of a European Army in a long-term perspective. However, it must be underlined that the *Strategic Compass* can only constitute a first stone to a bolder European defence strategy, and it is not followed by more substantial action, the *Compass* itself will not change the current state of affairs.

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