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How Many Compasses Does the European Union Need to Find North?

By

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Introduction

Despite the fact that the European Union (EU) was initially founded in 1951 as a collaborative scheme entitled the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) between France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxemburg for controlling coal and steel production, the idea behind this innovative concept was that cooperation between states – especially France and Germany – would strengthen their interdependence and create common interests, leading to the enhancement of the solidarity among them and the promotion of peace in the European continent.

Moreover, in the famous “*Shuman Declaration*” of May 9th, 1950 that proposed the creation of a European Coal and Steel Community, its architect had emphasized on the fact that the aforementioned goal would be achieved gradually, stating that:

“Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity.”

Since then, the ECSC has been through many changes, transforming into the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957 – which allowed its member-states to expand their cooperation in several economic fields, creating a Common Agricultural Policy in 1962 and a Customs Union in 1968 – and the current European Union (EU) in 1993 that established a Single Market. These changes also comprised the expansion of the EU member-states from 6 to 27, and the endorsement of a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), allowing the EU to address security issues and set specific goals in order to promote peace and stability.

In this context, the EU issued its first European Security Strategy in 2003, to be followed in 2016 by its second security strategy mostly known as “*Global Strategy*,” expressing the EU’s aspiration of becoming a worldwide security provider. To this end, the EU has proceeded to several actions, such as the deployment of a large number of civilian & military missions/operations outside its borders (Eastern Europe, Africa, Middle East, etc.), the financial support of many state and non-state actors in order to facilitate their institutional reform, and the establishment of a variety of tools in order to enhance its security & defense capabilities. Moreover, in 2022 the EU issued a document entitled

“*Strategic Compass*” and a second one in 2025 entitled “*Competitiveness Compass*.”

The 2022 Strategic Compass

On March 21st, 2022 – approximately a month after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine – the Council of the EU approved a document entitled “*A Strategic Compass for Security and Defense - For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security.*” Its aim was to make the EU a stronger and more capable security provider by 2030, by strengthening its security and defense policy through a plan of action that was structured around the following 4 pillars:

- ✓ ACT in order to develop the ability for rapid and robust action during crises,
- ✓ SECURE in order to be able to anticipate, deter and respond in a better way to contemporary and emerging threats and challenges, and safeguard its security interests,
- ✓ INVEST in order to enhance the defense expenditures of the EU’s member-states, reduce the existing critical capability gaps in the military and civilian sector and strengthen the European Defense Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB), and
- ✓ PARTNER in order to tackle threats and challenges faced by both the EU and its partners.

Based on the 2022 Strategic Compass, the EU – in an effort to adapt to the rapidly changing conditions of the contemporary security environment – issued a number of complimentary strategic documents, such as: the “*EU Maritime Security Strategy*,” the “*EU Space Strategy for Security & Defense*,” and the “*European Defense Industrial Strategy*.” It also initiated the maritime security operation “*EU NAVFOR ASPIDES*” in the wider Red Sea region, and signed several Security & Defense Partnerships (SDP) with European (Moldova, Norway, North Macedonia and Albania) and non-European actors (Japan and Republic of Korea).

Finally, one of the most recent EU actions in regard to the security & defense sector was the appointment of a Commissioner for Space and Defense in 2024, being tasked inter alia to:

- ✓ Prepare a White Paper on the Future of European Defense.
- ✓ Creating a true Single Market for Defense products and services.
- ✓ Overseeing the reinforcement of the European Defense Fund.
- ✓ Propose an EU Space Law and a Space Data Economy Strategy.

The 2025 Competitiveness Compass

On January 29th, 2025 – almost three years after the endorsement of the Strategic Compass – the European Commission presented a second strategic document entitled “A *Competitiveness Compass for the EU*.” This time, the aim was to reignite economic dynamism in Europe as according to the respective document:

“For over two decades, Europe has not kept pace with other major economies, due to a persistent gap in productivity growth. [...] To safeguard the EU’s future as an economic powerhouse, an investment destination and a manufacturing centre, a resolute European response is urgently needed. What is at stake for Europe is not just economic growth, but the future of its model.”

It is highlighted that before the publication of the Competitiveness Compass, the European Commission had been warned by Enrico Letta (former Italian Prime Minister) on April 10th, 2024, and by Mario Draghi (former Italian Prime Minister and former European Central Bank President) on September 9th, 2024 – through their respective reports in their capacity as Special Advisors of the European Commission’s President – about the dangers of the contemporary geopolitical & geoeconomic strategic environment, and the need for the EU to take action in order to:

- ✓ Empower the EU Single Market,
- ✓ Close the innovation gap with the US and China,
- ✓ Promote decarbonization and competitiveness, and finally

- ✓ Increase security and reduce dependencies.

To this end, the EU Competitiveness Compass represents the European Commission's economic doctrine until 2030, aiming at nurturing the EU's innate strengths, harnessing the EU's resources and removing the existing long-standing barriers that prevent both the EU and its member-states from being competitive. In order to achieve this, the aforementioned document defines the following 3 pillars (goals):

- ✓ *Closing the innovation gap, by*
 - Facilitating the establishment of start-ups and conditions for scaling up,
 - Creating a deeper and efficient venture capital market,
 - Easing mobility and retention of talent,
 - Investing in state-of-the-art infrastructures, and
 - Boosting innovation and research.
- ✓ *A joint roadmap for decarbonization and competitiveness, by:*
 - Integrating decarbonization policies with industrial, economic, and trade policies,
 - Facilitating access to affordable energy,
 - Strengthening the business case for a clean transition, and
 - Promoting competitiveness of clean tech manufacturers.
- ✓ *Reducing excessive dependencies and increasing security, by*
 - Developing policies, partnerships, and investments to ensure economic security, resilience, and strategic interests,
 - Strengthening defense industrial capabilities and support by pan-European cooperation, and

- Improving preparedness.

Moreover, the EU Competitiveness Compass provides for the following 5 horizontal enablers:

- ✓ *Simplification*, in order to reduce the regulatory and administrative burden for firms and small & medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).
- ✓ *Removing barriers in the Single Market*, through a Horizontal Single Market Strategy.
- ✓ *Financing*, through the creation of a European Savings and Investments Union.
- ✓ *Skills and quality jobs*, through the establishment of a Union of Skills.
- ✓ *Better coordination*, through the creation of a Competitiveness Coordination Tool and a Competitiveness Fund.

Concluding remarks

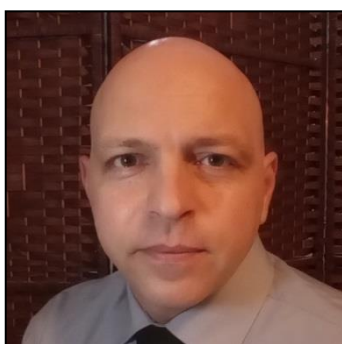
To sum up, despite the fact that the EU has gone a long way – not only as far as the economy is concerned, but also in regard to the security & defense sector – since its establishment, the main reasons that prevents it from progressing in most policy fields is: (a) its decision-making process that – due to the different perspectives of the EU’s member-states and the fact that in order to reach to a decision for significant issues unanimity is required – often leads to inaction, and (b) the highly bureaucratic nature that characterizes the implementation of the EU’s decisions that usually leads to long delays. That is why Mario Draghi, on the occasion of his keynote speech on February 18th, 2025 during the European Parliamentary Week, urged the European leaders to change their attitude stating:

“You say no to public debt. You say no to the single market. You say no to create a capital market union. You can't say no to everything...You ask me what's best to do...I don't know, but do something.”

To conclude, taking into consideration the vast variety of threats, the rapidly

changing conditions and the emerging dynamics – especially after Donald Trump’s re-election as US President – of the contemporary security environment, the leadership of the EU and its member-states must understand that the EU’s deficiency is not the result of a lack of plans, institutions and procedures, but the result of a lack of solidarity and decisiveness. That is why the European leaders need to keep in mind the quote of the famous US General George S. Patton (1885–1945), according to which:

“A good plan violently executed now is better than a perfect plan executed next week.”



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Lieutenant Colonel (Ret.) Georgios KOUKAKIS has graduated from the *Hellenic Military Academy* (2002), the *Hellenic Army War College* (2020) and the *Hellenic Supreme Joint War College* (2023). He retired in 2024 on his own initiative, after serving for 22 years as a Leader and Staff officer in several Special Forces and Infantry Units, and as an Instructor in the Hellenic Airborne School and the Hellenic Infantry School.

He holds a Master of Arts in ‘*Governance, Development and Security in the Mediterranean*’ from the Department of Mediterranean Studies of the University of the Aegean (Rhodes, Greece) – having graduated 1st among his Class with his dissertation focusing on the prospects of establishing a *National Security Council* (NSC) in the Hellenic Republic (Greece) – and an Adult Instructor of the Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning Center (CE-LLC) of the University of the Aegean (Rhodes, Greece).

He is also a Senior Analyst in the *Center for International Strategic Analyses* (KEDISA), a Research Associate of *HERMES Institute of International Affairs, Security & Geoeconomy* (I.I.A.S.GE.) and a member of the *Hellenic Institute of Strategic Studies* (HEL.I.S.S.), *ALLILONnet* the Global Network of Greeks and Friends of Greece for

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Many of his articles and research papers have been published in the ‘*Global Security and Intelligence Notes*’ (GSIN) and the ‘South and South East Asia Security Research Centre’ (SSEASRC) Research Notes of the Buckingham Centre of Security & Intelligence Studies (BUCSIS), the ‘*HAPSc Policy Briefs*’ Journal of the Hellenic Association of Political Scientists, the ‘*NRDC-GR Herald*’ Journal of NRDC-GR, the ‘*Military Review*’ Journal of the Hellenic Army General Staff (HAGS), the ‘*Cultural Diplomacy Journal*’ of the Hellenic Institute of Cultural Diplomacy (HICD).

In addition to his involvement in academic research regarding international relations, Georgios is a columnist in a number of foreign affairs, geopolitics and international affairs websites such as ‘*Foreign Affairs - The Hellenic Edition*’, ‘*Policy Journal*’, ‘*Geopolitics & Daily News*’, ‘*HuffPost Greece*’, ‘*Liberal*’, ‘*Geopolitico*’, ‘*LEP*’ and ‘*Active News*’.

He is the co-author of the book (In Greek) ‘**National Security: Myths and Reality**’ that was published in April 2023, and the author of the book ‘**Armed Conflict & National Security in the 21st Century**’ that was published in January 2025.

Since 2024, he serves as the Academic Head of the Educational Program (in Greek) ‘**Security Studies in the Mediterranean (BASIC)**’ and ‘**Getting to know Security Studies through the work of Thucydides**’ of the Continuing Education & Lifelong Learning Center of the University of the Aegean.

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