

Strategic Culture: an elusive but necessary foundation for EU security and defence?



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Report

INTRODUCTION

From the quietness of studies in war colleges to the havoc of the battlefield, 'strategic culture' is an essential feature of defence as it embodies a shared perception of threats and helps breed solidarity within a political community. Despite the recent steps forward in EU security and defence, the practical meaning and contours of the term strategic culture in an EU context are still elusive. What is the meaning of strategic culture in EU security and defence? In what ways is having a common strategic culture crucial for security and defence? How can Europe do more and ensure its strategic relevance worldwide?

STRATEGIC PURPOSE IN A HOSTILE WORLD

The strategic environment facing the EU is more and more challenging. The Union is faced with hostile actions seeking to divide Member States and foreign interference aims to discredit the EU's democratic systems. Cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns are becoming the norm while in some parts of the world, democracy appears to be receding and authoritarianism is growing.

With growing great power rivalry, the Union has to enhance its strategic autonomy in security and defence. In this respect, the Strategic Compass of the European Union should provide guidance for the next decade. Russia continues its destabilising behaviour at Europe's borders and within the EU and its military modernisation, in particular with regard to ballistic missiles, is a genuine concern. China too is bolstering its military presence and it is making wide use of disinformation and propaganda. China's treatment of Hong Kong and the oppression of the Uyghurs challenges European values and calls into doubt the potential for the rules-based coexistence of peoples.

There are many crises on Europe's borders too. In the Sahel, the deteriorating security situation is still a major risk for Europeans and instability there impedes the development of peace in the region. The situation in Ukraine and Belarus is tense and the regime in Belarus is engaged in an unprecedented act of state terrorism over European airspace. The future of Syria and Libya remains unclear, and there remain challenging questions about the strategic direction of Iran and Turkey. The security situation in Mozambique and Ethiopia is another reason to fear the emergence of regional crises that will affect European interests.

Lastly, Europe is facing unprecedented challenges in the global commons. Free access to the maritime, space, air, and cyber domains is a cause of major concern.

Without mastery in these domains, there could be a further erosion of European power in international affairs.

THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

Culture can refer to a community bound together by a common worldview, customs, interests, beliefs and destinies. Culture is also a way of overcoming threats, challenges and risks by using force or refraining from it. It can also relate to difference, or complementarity, with other communities. More specifically, the term 'strategic culture' seems to imply a set of traditions, values, patterns of behaviour, common achievements and history and methods of problem solving and decision-making.

National strategic cultures in the EU can be easily discerned. For instance, France is a nuclear power that fully integrates the potential use of force in its strategy. Germany, on the other hand, is more cautious about the use of force in its national strategy. Other countries, such as neutral and non-aligned states, may embody radically different strategic cultures, depending on their constitutional arrangements and histories.

Strategic culture is not just about institutions or tools, but first and foremost about concrete action and results - this can be referred to as 'strategic culture by doing'. Strategic cultures are not fixed, they evolve over time with new experiences and needs. When European governments deploy together on operations or whenever they engage in the protection of Europe, they are generating a common sense of strategic understanding and solidarity.

For example, several European countries are militarily engaged in the Sahel region, which points to a common threat perception and solidarity within the EU. Naval cooperation in the Gulf of Guinea or the Strait of Hormuz also shows the growth of a more meaningful European strategic culture. Such military efforts can be supported by *ad hoc* forums such as the European Intervention Initiative (EI²). At the EU level, tangible joint initiatives help to raise strategic awareness and strategic dialogue among Member States. The initiation of EUNAVFOR Operation IRINI shows that the Union can act swiftly when its Member States agree.

Operationally speaking, the EU already has some 5,000 personnel deployed on missions and operations and the Union has developed tools such as the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC), the European Peace Facility (EPF) and the Coordinated Maritime Presence (CMP) to further enhance its operational engagement and strategic presence. Such endeavours show that strategic culture is not only built on shared threat perceptions, but also through jointly taking on common projects.

Furthermore, Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) is based on 20 binding commitments that are designed to enhance EU security and defence. Each year the participating Member States report on their progress through the National Implementation Plans (NIPs). Member States are also working together across the 46 PESCO projects currently being developed, and will soon do so in more projects, and this also implies that strategic awareness is emerging on the back of capability development. The same is true of the European Defence Fund (EDF), which finances the development of defence capabilities.

THE NEED FOR MORE STRATEGIC AWARENESS

Although many can agree that the EU is facing a more geopolitically turbulent and hostile world, there is less agreement on what the EU should be able to do in practice given the diversity of national threat perceptions. EU Member States have different national strategic cultures based on history, culture and geographical position. Yet this should not serve as a hindrance to the nurturing of an EU strategic culture, especially if we agree that the aim is not to create a *single* strategic culture, but rather a *shared* European one that builds on specific national cultures. In this regard, it is important to recognise that a genuine EU strategic culture should emerge organically from shared dialogue and experiences, and it should not simply reflect the vision of a single state. A shared strategic dialogue already rests at the heart of the EU Strategic Compass process, which will contribute to the building of a shared European strategic culture.

What is required is a more common language among Member States when they think about the need for and responsible use of power. Although strategic culture does not exclusively embody hard power, it can also be observed that security and defence, and questions about the geostrategic role of the EU, still occupy a minor role in the EU's overall strategic evolution and messaging. There is still too little political awareness at the highest political levels in Member States and institutions. The relative absence of defence in the Conference on the Future of Europe shows us the current ambition in overall political terms.

Awareness among future generations is also a crucial element of strategic culture. Younger citizens have shown their dissatisfaction with the *status quo* and they do not want to take important decisions for granted any more - the discussions on climate change showed that younger citizens can disrupt politics for the better. In this manner, strategy, values and interests must not be a foreign concept for these generations, especially as they mainly know power politics and war from the movies or computer games. Therefore, active exchange on strategic issues across generations and within societies should be pushed.

THE STRATEGIC COMPASS AND STRATEGIC CULTURE

The forthcoming EU Strategic Compass has the potential to further develop and increase the level of awareness for an EU strategic culture in security and defence. It is seen as a unique way to stimulate debate among Member States, generate strategic solidarity on threats and go beyond the defence initiatives developed since 2016. It is for this reason that many participants called for the regular revision of the Threat Analysis and the Strategic Compass (e.g. every five years), as this would keep strategic reflection high on the political agenda and help to bridge the gap in perceptions and strategic aims.

Yet, the Strategic Compass cannot just be a mechanism for regular strategic dialogue. It should also lead to tangible outcomes and strengthen the EU's strategic pertinence in a more volatile world. Europe's current shape is not good - it lacks capabilities and critical enablers. In this respect, the Strategic Compass can give weight to the idea of an EU strategic culture by stressing the importance of defence investments. The pandemic will affect European economies but China, Russia and the United States are pulling away from the EU in terms of military capabilities.

An EU strategic culture would also become more of a reality should EU member states deploy more frequently together through civil and military missions and

operations. To this end, there is a need to experiment with Article 44 TEU in order to ensure that coalitions of the willing within the EU can act when needed - here, flexibility is key. Additionally, no genuine EU strategic culture can emerge without developing further the Union's potential responses to invocations of Article 42.7 TEU (mutual assistance clause) and Article 222 TFEU (solidarity clause). In this sense, strategic culture 'begins at home' in the EU with a clear sense of solidarity among EU Member States.

Furthermore, the Compass can underline the need for greater interoperability between European armed forces and the reduction of strategic dependencies. Such actions can ensure that the EU enhances its strategic autonomy and capacity for action, as well as strengthening its role as a strategic partner for NATO and the United States.

Strategic communication is another key element of EU strategic culture. Such communication should be led by EU governments rather than EU institutions, especially as there is a need to ensure consistency between messaging in Brussels and back home. Nevertheless, it is essential for EU institutions and bodies such as the EEAS, the European Commission and the European Council to ensure that security and defence are elevated in the EU's political discourse. There is also a special role here for European Parliament, which can help to increase democratic legitimacy. When communicating with the public there is a need for institutions and governments to be open about the EU's position in the world and what is at stake in geopolitical terms. The use of force is extremely contentious in several EU member states, but hard power has once again resurfaced. Recognising the EU's present lack of hard power, strategic communication is not just about outlining how the EU's defence initiatives function, but rather engaging in core political questions related to geopolitics, power and peace.