

"SOLDIERS OUT, CIVILIANS LEFT BEHIND"

**Lessons from Kabul as
the EU sets its Strategic Compass**

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FOREWORD

Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine on 24 February constitutes a rude geopolitical awakening, calling into question many of Europe's fundamental assumptions. It marks the end of an era in European security starting in 1991 and lasting 30 years, during which Europeans have enjoyed the dividend of peace and largely neglected the threat of war.

In this period, we've seen European conventional forces partly wither to paper armies, NATO searching for the question it should answer, often projecting itself out of territory, and the EU struggling to find its way as a capable actor in security and defence in the face of grave crises in the Balkans and abroad.

After Europe's failings in Bosnia, Kosovo became the wake-up call that prompted the 1999 Helsinki European Council to set an EU Headline goal of 60,000 deployable troops within 60 days. Yet four years later only, spurred on by the first autonomous EU-led operation Artemis in Congo, the emphasis shifted to rapid reaction and crisis management abroad with the development of the EU's 1,500 personnel strong Battlegroup concept.

To this day, this crisis management narrative has prevailed but with few operational credentials to show for. It was also the dominant backdrop to the discussions on the EU's Strategic Compass, the part-strategy, part-action plan, that brought member states together as of June 2020.

Then, in the summer of 2021 came the evacuation from Kabul. The shambolic Western flight from Afghanistan highlighted grave US and European failures in anticipation and coordination. It also projected again the image of Europe as incapable of deciding and acting by itself when faced with urgency. Where were the EU battlegroups?

The simple answer is that the CSDP's decision-making and operational means were never conceived for an evacuation effort at such speed and scale in a non-permissive environment. Still, fuelled both by the humbling in Kabul and a sense of budding European can-do, the EU's Strategic Compass discussions doubled down on plans for a 5,000-man strong Rapid Deployment Capacity based on national air, land and sea force modules and critical enablers.

The war in Ukraine now upends the EU's careful planning and emergent policy consensus. On the one hand, where many would have thought the EU would not realistically face a Kabul-type evacuation scenario again, the encirclement of Kyiv allows for a doubt. On the other, the EU's unexpected role as a "first responder" in the crisis, not only through sanctions but as a clearinghouse and funder of military support to Ukraine, and the indirect threat to EU borders and territory, raises the question of the EU's future role in aspects of collective defence.

Has the Strategic Compass risen simultaneously to the challenges from Ukraine and Kabul? It was always doubtful it could. The EU commits in ambitious language both to "defend the European security order" and to develop a Rapid Deployment Capacity in reaction to crises, including operational scenarios for rescue and evacuation.¹ Yet these are only words for the time being. What would otherwise have been ambitious reflections and commitments to take

the CSDP forward inevitably appears as coming up short against the momentous turn of history.

Revisiting the evacuation of Kabul, and the combined failures of NATO and the EU, amid the war in Ukraine, as this report purports to do, is in itself a tall order. NATO and the EU should not, however, under the pretext of a pressing new crisis, overlook these realities, which likely also entered into President Putin's calculus. For the EU, in this new geopolitical environment, addressing its credibility deficit in defence becomes particularly pressing. As recent European history has shown, most diplomatic action is not successful if it cannot be sustained, if necessary, by military means.

This report provides a description of central decision moments in the spring and summer of 2021 and an assessment of the principal factors contributing to failure. It seeks on this basis to draw some political lessons for the EU's security and defence policy, as well as recommendations on the way forward for the EU's proposed Rapid Deployment Capacity and the broader reform of the EU's crisis management architecture.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The conditions of the 2021 evacuation from Kabul were nothing short of chaotic. In the heat of action mid-August, Bundeswehr planes circled Kabul, ran out of fuel and could not land, or departed home all but empty as evacuees could not be brought to the airport. With thousands massed for days at the airport gates in brutish conditions, the sight, sound and smell of human suffering and despair mixed with the sense of imminent threat.

In the end, Dutch armed forces left interpreters behind, contradicting a parliamentary commitment that everyone who worked for the Netherlands should be evacuated. In the UK, thousands of emails from Afghans in danger were left unread. Failure in the responsibility to protect also extends to NATO and the EU. Both organisations left (former) local staff, broken promises and shattered hopes behind as the last planes left Kabul, as was the case for most allies and countries involved in Afghanistan over the past 20 years.

1. WHAT WENT WRONG: TWO CRITICAL DECISION-MAKING MOMENTS

If the anecdotes are many and disturbing, the analysis of what went wrong must focus on the critical junctures in decision-making. In this regard, two moments stand out: the establishment of the military withdrawal schedule in mid-April and the month of August when all countries involved scrambled to get their civilians out too.

- 1. April-June 2021: *Spring insouciance*.** On 14 April, Biden announced the calendar for the withdrawal of all US troops from Afghanistan. Despite limited US consultation upfront, the NATO Ministerial that took place on the same day promptly endorsed this decision and the withdrawal of the Resolute Support Mission forces. In public, all NATO allies put up a brave face, and optimism was the order of the day, despite there being both intelligence and public concern about the consequences of a rapid military withdrawal. As for the EU, an analysis of publicly available documents from the Foreign Affairs Council meetings that took place in this period shows that Afghanistan was simply not a foreign policy priority, leading to a conspicuous lack of attention to possible consequences also at EU headquarters (see Focus box A).
- 2. July-August 2021: *Summer 'sauve qui peut'*.** By the end of June, NATO and US forces were moving fast out of the country. The Taliban were making substantial territorial gains and preparing offensives towards key cities. Despite acknowledging that the Taliban was at its strongest militarily since 2001, the US decided to move forward the schedule for troop withdrawal to 31 August. The US administration and its allies were still in denial about the possibility of an imminent Taliban takeover, and an evacuation of civilians was not envisaged. Come August, and matters went from bad to worse. The Taliban advanced quickly, winning significant ground and entered Kabul on 15 August. The race against the clock then started for the US and all allies to get as many entitled persons out as possible. The EU institutions had prepared no better and were equally blindsided by the speed of events and decisions.

2. LESSONS LEARNED: THREE FACTORS IN FAILURE TO PREPARE FOR EVACUATION

"We all misread the situation" was German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas' assessment on 16 August. It has the merit of honesty and conciseness, and simply put, he was right. But the economy of words should not stand in the way of deeper scrutiny of the errors committed. Three factors of failure jump to the eye from the assessment of those critical months:

- 1. Dependence on the US and NATO group think.** During the allied engagement in Afghanistan, the US was always in the lead. The Europeans happily followed with NATO acting as the drive belt and repository of collective decisions. Afghanistan revealed a military alliance dependent on US leadership while most other allies remained caught in a form of groupthink, largely incapable of critical examination as illustrated by the absence of comprehensive discussion when the military withdrawal was decided on 14 April 2021. In the case of the EU, the implicit division of labour with NATO also played a role: Afghanistan had been the US and NATO's endeavour and responsibility, not the EU's, creating the expectation that a crisis would also be dealt with at NATO level.
- 2. A collective failure of anticipation.** Once the decision had been taken to withdraw militarily, the allies failed to plan for the worst-case scenario of a collapse of the Afghan security and state functions. This absence of anticipation left everyone unprepared for the events in August. On the EU side, there was a lack of intelligence but not least a striking deficit of attention to what was happening. When the Taliban entered Kabul on 15 August, EU institutions were largely unprepared. A few uncertain days followed, informed as much by TV images as by reliable information on the ground. In Brussels, at the EEAS headquarters, it was a time for improvisation. The EU's delegation in Kabul was not staffed and ready for an evacuation effort in the timeframe set by the US retreat and at the scale required by the EU's duty of care.
- 3. The absence of European will and capabilities.** The overall picture of EU Council discussions in the critical months of March to July reveals that Afghanistan was not a foreign policy priority for the EU executive. Still, had contingency planning for evacuation from Kabul been on everybody's mind in April 2021, few would have envisaged it in the context of the CSDP. For that, the operational capacities are too weak, the procedural hurdles too high, and the gains of joint CSDP action too low. Going into August, the EU's crisis management readiness got tested and proved deficient. The Integrated Political Crisis Response (IPCR) arrangements that support rapid and coordinated EU decision-making in complex crises were never activated. The Political and Security Committee (PSC), which generally meets twice a week or more, was similarly dormant in August and only met in urgency when an extraordinary Foreign Affairs Council had been called under the overflowing pressure from events. The evacuation from Kabul proved that Brussels is rife with discussions of 'strategic autonomy' but still lacks the basic implements of that autonomy in terms of political will, appropriate decision-making structures and military capabilities.

There is no dark cloud without a silver lining. If there is a positive learning experience in those August days, it is the realisation of a burgeoning European operational "can do". When faced with imperative necessity, gear wheels of action locked into position, communication lines

opened, diplomacy deployed, and European planes and other strategic enablers combined. There was solidarity from one country to another, and EU means were not only used but played a non-negligible role in the airlift. In the final moments, ad hoc and informal coordination across institutions and on the ground contributed to saving the day, highlighting perhaps to EU sceptics that a sum can be more than its parts.

3. WHAT TO DO NOW: FOUR RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE EU AS A SECURITY PROVIDER

The unfolding of events from April to August 2021 points to Europe's most profound problem in security and defence. Fundamentally, it is neither the capacity to plan a NEO mission nor force generation; it is the Europeans' *state of mind*. Providing for one's own security obviously demands military capabilities and decision-making structures. But ever since the 1998 Saint-Malo declaration put European strategic autonomy and capacity to act on the agenda, a primary question has remained unanswered: *do Europeans have the collective pride and self-esteem to provide for their own security?*

The Strategic Compass, as adopted on 21 March, is intended as a forceful answer. In his foreword, HRVP Borrell speaks of turning "the EU's geopolitical awakening [into] robust capabilities and the willingness to use them against the full spectrum of threats". The Compass itself speaks of a European Union committed to defending the European security order, invoking both partnership with NATO and the EU's own mutual assistance clause (article 42(7) TEU). It goes on to pledge an ability to act rapidly and robustly whenever a crisis erupts, with partners if possible and alone when necessary with the establishment of a Rapid Deployment Capacity by 2025 and new operational scenarios including rescue and evacuation.

At no point before have the EU's ambitions in security and defence seemingly been spelt out so ambitiously. Will they be followed up on? This report makes four recommendations:

1. Giving full measure to the EU as a security organisation. Far from invalidated by the return of Russia and NATO to the spotlight, developing the EU's capacity to act is as necessary as ever before. The Strategic Compass process is not an end itself, only the building block for further developments. In this regard, the EU institutions, the HRVP and the External Action Service must show a determination to lead. A major test will be the member states' willingness to follow up on commitments. EU Leaders should make the consolidation of the CSDP and the EU's crisis management architecture a priority of the moment, within a new euro-transatlantic settlement on Europe's security architecture.

As a striking example of the mismatch between EU responsibilities and institutional readiness, Afghanistan highlighted the EU's deficiency of planning and means to follow-up on its '**duty of care**' for staff linked to its missions, delegations and offices in some 140 countries around the world (see Focus box B). This now requires the establishment of a cross-institutions (EEAS-Commission) evacuation cell, tasked with the constant monitoring of countries at risk and the building of a recognised 'eligible persons' picture.

2. Clarifying EU-NATO complementarity at the highest level. The upcoming 2022 NATO Leaders' Summit in Madrid should be the occasion to forge "a new transatlantic deal"

recognising at leaders' level an evident complementarity between NATO's role in territorial defence and as a bulwark towards the East, and the EU's role in resilience at home and crisis management in Europe's broader neighbourhood. The Strategic Compass is an important step towards a grand new design and more transatlantic burden-sharing from the EU but needs to be supported by NATO's upcoming Strategic Concept.

- 3. Setting up a *standing* 'EU Rapid Deployment Capacity', now.** To prove the immediate value of the Strategic Compass a *standing* rapid deployment capacity should be created now, not in 2025, based on existing national capabilities (land, sea, air modules and key enablers). Europe has well over one million active military personnel, so the capacity to muster a multi-modal force of 5,000 is just a matter of will and organisation. Yet if it is to happen by careful persuasion by the EU Military Staff, it will take time. Results should be made simple by Leaders' decisions. France and Germany could take the initiative and form the core of such an EU capacity ("France and Germany do"), open to the participation of others ("others join"). It should be financed by the EU Peace Facility ("the EU pays") and open to use within NATO ("single set of forces"). In line with the Treaties, unanimity decision-making would continue to apply if used within the remit of the CSDP.

- 4. Reshaping the EU's civilian-military crisis management architecture.** The EU needs a new integrated architecture across institutions to face new demands as a security organisation and crisis manager. Past calls for an EU 'Security Council' have not been followed up on, despite today's rotating EU Council Presidency-led Integrated Political Crisis Response (IPCR) arrangements presenting serious weaknesses. At the top level, an 'Emergency Response and Security Council' would meet in European Council format. The Commission/ EEAS should have the inter-institutional lead at the day-to-day working level. To support this, further operational integration of civilian (Commission/EEAS) and military planning and conduct (EUMS) is required in a 'one building'-approach so that services operate under one roof with shared infrastructure. In the Commission, crisis management should be centralised around the Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC).

TIMELINE OF THE RETREAT FROM AFGHANISTAN

- Feb. 29, 2020** — [Trump administration and Taliban agree on withdrawal by May 1, 2021](#): in effect, signs end to condition-based withdrawal of remaining 13,000 US troops
- Sept. 12, 2020** — Doha peace negotiations between Afghan government and Taliban
- Nov. 17, 2020** — the [US announces force reduction to 2,500](#) by Jan. 15, 2021, lowest since 2001
- Feb. 19** — Biden reiterates promise to bring U.S. troops home; peace negotiations stalling
- April 14** — Biden announces withdrawal by Sept. 11.
- April 14** — [North Atlantic Council Ministerial Statement](#): “Start of withdrawal by May 1. Drawdown of all troops within a few months”
- April 19** — [Informal meeting of EU Foreign Affairs Ministers](#) (by video), Afghanistan not on the agenda
- June 10** — [EP resolution on Afghanistan](#): “(...) danger of intensification of internal conflicts and a vacuum that in the worst case scenario will be filled by the Taliban”
- June 14** — [NATO summit in Brussels](#): “we remain committed to stand with Afghanistan and its people”
- June 30** — [Germany and Italy declare their missions in Afghanistan over](#), Poland’s last troops return home
- July 2** — [US closes Bagram airfield](#), the largest airfield in Afghanistan, once home to 10,000 troops
- July 6** — more than [90% of US withdrawal process completed](#); in parallel, number of contractors drops to 7,800 from nearly 17,000 in April
- July 8** — [Biden moves the deadline](#) for full troop withdrawal to Aug. 31, acknowledging Taliban “is at its strongest militarily since 2001”
- July 13** — [French citizens advised to leave the country asap](#), special flight organized
- July 14** — Launch of [US Operation Allies Refuge](#)
- July 21** — Gen Milley, Chairman of US Joint Chiefs of Staff: “[Taliban military takeover not a foregone conclusion](#)”
- Aug. 2** — Taliban launches assaults on two major Afghan cities, [Kandahar and Herat](#), 650 US troops remain to [guard embassy in Kabul](#)
- Aug. 8** — Fall of first major Afghan city, Kunduz, former [centre of German Afghanistan efforts](#)
- Aug. 12** — [US government announces deployment of 3,000 combat troops](#) to help evacuate diplomats, civilians and Afghans
- Aug. 14** — [Biden administration announce troop increase to 5,000](#)
- Aug. 15** — Taliban fighters enter Kabul; [Germany closes its Kabul embassy](#), Spain announces evacuation of remaining citizens and Afghans
- Aug 16** — France activates EU’s civil protection mechanism to help evacuate civilians
- Aug. 17** — [North Atlantic Council meeting](#): “Kabul has fallen”. NATO has no more soldiers, but 800 civilians left in Afghanistan
- Aug. 17** — [Foreign Affairs Council informal videoconference](#): “every possible effort” to ensure the security of all EU citizens and local staff; evacuation effort “ongoing”.
- Aug. 20** — [Meeting of NATO foreign ministers](#): commitment to the safe evacuation of nationals, and at-risk Afghans; close operational coordination through military means at Kabul airport
- Aug. 26** — [Suicide bombing](#) at Hamid Karzai International Airport
- Aug. 30** — At 23:59, the last US military plane, a US Air Force C-17, leaves Kabul.

A minute to midnight.

As the last plane and soldiers took off from Kabul on Monday, 30 August 2021, the four words ripped across international news services, announcing in somewhat heroic terms the end of the largest humanitarian airlift mission in history. It also marked the end of two decades of war and the indisputable failure of the US-led western alliance in Afghanistan.

Over a few August weeks, more than 125,000 people had been evacuated through the Hamid Karzai International Airport and onto planes towards transit airports, and eventually onwards to Europe and the US. Yet despite the impressive numbers and logistics, the operation stands forth as all else than a well-planned exit.

Four months earlier, on 14 April, NATO foreign affairs ministers had met in Brussels to decide on the end of NATO's involvement in Afghanistan and the schedule of withdrawal of all *Resolute Support Mission* forces. In a solemn statement, the North Atlantic Council Ministerial affirmed that the pull-out would be « orderly, coordinated, and deliberate » and coined the motto '*in together, out together*'.

With hindsight, this critical juncture in the spring stands as a moment of grave error in leadership and judgement.

In its essence, military planning is about preparing for every scenario. But NATO acted on a "fair weather"-outlook where Afghanistan's security forces would hold the country, or at least Kabul, and international diplomats and civilian efforts could stay to support the political and economic transition.

In the following months, NATO and other troops withdrew on schedule, but civilian efforts remained behind. As media and the public eventually discovered, the US and its NATO allies had made no provision for a non-combatant evacuation operation (NEO) should matters come to the worst.

Two Dutch ministers resigned over the ensuing debacle. Yet, they had not been alone: the calendar of military withdrawal was set by the US, but decisions were collectively endorsed by NATO and largely, by the broader western community.

The case of the EU is interesting. Over more than ten ministerial meetings from early 2021 to mid-July, the EU's Foreign Affairs Council stayed conspicuously silent on Afghanistan as if underscoring a division of roles in Brussels: from beginning to end, Afghanistan was the US and NATO's responsibility. Yet as the Taliban circled in on Kabul in the summer, threatening not only a collapse of the regime but also thousands of civilians from EU member states, that position became untenable. Over the subsequent weeks in August, the EU's political leadership and civilian and military crisis management capacities were called upon to support evacuation efforts led by the most capable member states.

Undeniably, in failure, there are learnings for everyone. Even if Europe's security debate has

moved on to the bigger and more pressing challenges of Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, this paper aims to revisit the Afghanistan evacuation to see what operational conclusions the EU must draw in the context of implementing the Strategic Compass.

The exact conditions of the Afghanistan evacuation might not be seen again for many years. Still, there is a range of other scenarios that the EU must consider: European soldiers or citizens in danger needing evacuation from failing states or war zones; humanitarian assistance and disaster relief; short term stability support to governments and initial entry missions.

This requires a commitment to, and the building of, EU rapid deployment capacities *effectively* ready to be used, associated with appropriate crisis management structures for EU decision-making. Post-Afghanistan, reflection is also needed on the EU's responsibility to protect local staff involved with the European delegations, projects, missions and operations.

This paper is structured in three parts: (1) a description of central decision moments in the spring and during crisis management in August 2021; (2) an assessment of the main factors contributing to failure; and (3) recommendations for the EU encompassing the political lessons for Europe's overall security architecture in the context of the Strategic Compass, the implications for current discussions on an EU Rapid Deployment Capacity and the need for a new crisis management architecture.

PART 1 – WHAT WENT WRONG: TWO CRITICAL DECISION-MAKING MOMENTS

The conditions of the August evacuation from Kabul were nothing short of chaotic as media and parliamentary scrutiny in the European Parliament, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK have uncovered. In the heat of action mid-August, Bundeswehr planes circled Kabul, ran out of fuel and could not land, or [departed home all but empty](#) as evacuees could not be brought to the airport.ⁱⁱ Dutch armed forces [left interpreters behind](#), contradicting a parliamentary commitment that everyone who worked for the Netherlands should be evacuated.ⁱⁱⁱ In the UK, [thousands of emails from Afghans in danger were left unread](#) for days.^{iv}

Failure in the responsibility to protect also extends to NATO and the EU. As was the case for most allies and member states, both organisations left (former) local staff behind as the last planes left Kabul. If the anecdotes are many and disturbing, the analysis of what went wrong must focus on the critical junctures in decision-making. In this regard, two moments stand out: the establishment of the military withdrawal schedule in mid-April and the month of August when all countries involved scrambled to get their civilians out too.

1. April-June: Spring *insouciance*

a) US and NATO decide...

When the Biden administration took office, it was facing a [worsening security situation](#)^v in Afghanistan, with the Taliban steadily gaining ground, and a set of bad options: to follow through with the agreement from January 2020 negotiated by the Trump administration that would see all US troops out by 1 May; to continue the military presence and rethink the US role in the country and the negotiations between Taliban and the Afghan government, or to stick to the withdrawal decision but on a different timeline.

As the 1 May deadline loomed, the option of immediate withdrawal became increasingly unrealistic. It also became clear that the US intended to leave sooner rather than later. On 14 April, Biden made his intentions clear: all US troops would leave Afghanistan by 11 September. The [NATO Ministerial](#) that took place on the same day in effect endorsed this decision: “[...] recognising that there is no military solution to the challenges Afghanistan faces, Allies have determined that we will start the withdrawal of Resolute Support Mission forces by 1 May. [and] completed within a few months.”^{vi}

The US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken had arrived in Brussels to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg for the announcement. But it could not hide that the US in reality, was giving marching orders. Despite the many tough questions remaining unanswered, the other Allies had [“little choice but to salute smartly”](#) and follow suit^{vii}: a total of 2,500 US troops and a further [7,000 from other NATO allies](#) were duly scheduled for withdrawal over the following months.^{viii}

b) ... but fail to plan?

The degree of discussion amongst NATO allies that went into the decision remains a contested fact. Ex post UK defence secretary, Ben Wallace, has claimed that [the UK was so aghast at the US decision](#)^x that it had, "[alongside NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg](#)", canvassed "a number of key countries" to see if there was support for a reconfigured alliance.^x Stoltenberg, for his part, has played down any such discussions about a continued troop presence, highlighting instead that no allied country could keep forces in Afghanistan without US military support.

What is certain is that there was both intelligence and public concern about the consequences of military withdrawal. On 9 April 2021, the [US intelligence community's Annual threat assessment](#) had warned that the "Taliban is likely to make gains on the battlefield, and the Afghan Government will struggle to hold the Taliban at bay if the coalition withdraws support".^{xi} In Germany, experts and officials (speaking under anonymity) worried that what was now shaping up as an [unconditional withdrawal in effect would hand Afghanistan to the Taliban](#).^{xii}

Yet, in public, NATO allies put up a brave face, and optimism was the order of the day. While recognising it was "not a decision we hoped for", UK Chief of the Defence Staff General Carter tellingly summed up the strategy of the moment: "*The Afghan armed forces are indeed much better trained than one might imagine. I think they could easily hold together and all of this could work out.* [We will just have to see.](#)"^{xiii}

c) The EU looks elsewhere

Over at EU headquarters, the approach was different, but the effect was the same. An analysis of publicly available documents from the EU Foreign Affairs Council meetings that took place in this period shows a conspicuous lack of attention to Afghanistan. Between mid-January and mid-July, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice President of the European Commission (HRVP) Josep Borrell held more than 11 meetings with the member states' foreign affairs or defence ministers. At 9 of these, Afghanistan was neither on the agenda nor mentioned in background briefs and records of discussions (see Focus box A).

The notable exception is the meeting of defence ministers on 6 May, where ministers had an informal working lunch with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg that covered the "operational engagement in theatres of common interest, from the Mediterranean to Afghanistan". This said, beyond the shared wish to 'preserve the gains of the last 20 years', and the [update on the drawdown of forces](#), it was far from a substantial, critical examination of the potential consequences of troop withdrawal.^{xiv} The meeting was a formality, not an in-depth exchange on the exit strategy from Afghanistan. Interestingly, at the same Council, EU ministers also discussed – in the abstract and not linked to Afghanistan – how missions and operations could be launched more quickly, with an ['initial entry force' deployed as 'first responder'](#) in urgent crisis.^{xv}

EU foreign affairs ministers then returned to the issue of Afghanistan only on 12 July, this time at a moment when most European allies were finalising the withdrawal of their forces. As highlighted by the public record, the [emphasis on the eve of the summer was getting the Taliban to engage in peace negotiations](#).^{xvi} Undeniably, there was an increased sense of urgency as the Taliban were making territorial gains, but the state of mind remained that Kabul

would not fall any time soon. As another sad but ironic coincidence of the calendar, at the same Council ministers lauded themselves for having [prepared in “record time” a new EU training mission](#) and examined the need for an air bridge, only at this moment, not for Afghanistan, but Mozambique and Ethiopia.^{xvii}

Focus box A: Afghanistan, no priority of EU Foreign Affairs Councils January-July 2021

- **Foreign Affairs Council, 25 January:** Afghanistan not on agenda, nor in public background brief and records.
- **Foreign Affairs Council, 22 February,** including [video conference with US State Secretary Antony Blinken](#): first high-level interaction between the EU and the new US administration. In a broad list of topics ranging from transatlantic dialogue, vaccines, recovery and climate change, the discussion “touched on international opportunities and challenges such as relations with China and Russia, Iran and security and defence”. No specific mention of Afghanistan.
- **Video conference of the members of the European Council, 25-26 February,** including [exchange of views on EU-NATO relations with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg](#). The European Council debated travel restrictions, vaccines, health and solidarity with 3rd countries. On the agenda, also security and defence, but with a focus on the Strategic Compass. No specific mention of Afghanistan.
- **Foreign Affairs Council, 22 March:** Afghanistan not on agenda, nor in public background brief and records.
- **Informal video conference of foreign affairs ministers, 19 April:** Afghanistan not on agenda, nor in public background brief and records.
- **Informal video conference of foreign affairs ministers (Development), 29 April:** Afghanistan not on agenda, nor in public background brief and records.
- **Foreign Affairs Council (Defence), 6 May,** including an [informal working lunch with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg](#). The exchange with the NATO SG covered “operational engagement in theatres of common interest, from the Mediterranean to Afghanistan”. Ministers also discussed how missions and operations could be launched more quickly and the idea of an initial entry force that could be deployed as ‘first responder’ in an urgent crisis.
- **Foreign Affairs Council, 10 May:** Afghanistan not on agenda, nor in public background brief and records.
- **Informal video conference of foreign affairs ministers, 18 May:** Afghanistan not on agenda, nor in public background brief and records.
- **European Union Military Committee (EUMC), EU chiefs of defence meeting, 19 May:** EU Chiefs of Defence meet with HRVP Borrell and discuss the Strategic Compass, the EU battlegroup and the CSDP military missions and operations, “along with the chair of the NATO Military Committee, Sir Stuart Peach, they will also discuss the state of play of EU-NATO cooperation”. No specific mention of Afghanistan.
- **Informal meeting of foreign affairs ministers (Gymnich) and defence ministers, 27-28 May,** including [dinner with NATO Secretary-General](#). Afghanistan is not formally on agenda but likely discussed.
- **Foreign Affairs Council, 21 June:** Afghanistan not on agenda, nor in public background brief and records.
- **Foreign Affairs Council, 12 July:** Afghanistan on agenda, in public background brief and records: “Ministers also addressed the situation in Afghanistan, in light of the withdrawal of US and NATO troops and the increase in ethnically motivated targeted attacks. In this context, the High Representative emphasised the need to urge the Taliban to engage in substantive and inclusive peace negotiations, and to reach out to countries in the region and the broader international community to play a constructive role in support of the Afghan peace process.”

Focus box B: The EU institutions' 'duty of care'

The EU has a 'duty of care' linked to its missions, operations and presence through delegations and offices in some [140 countries](#) across the world. This duty of care is notably set out in the '[Security rules for the European External Action Service](#)' where it applies to all staff placed under the responsibility of the EEAS regardless of their administrative status or origin, as well as their dependents (family members) It is defined as taking all reasonable steps to implement security measures to prevent reasonably foreseeable harm, including those resulting from emergency situations or crises. If the security situation so requires, it also covers evacuation.

EU delegations, missions, and operations have security and contingency plans, which might also cover evacuation depending on the situation. Given the EU's lack of means, so-called non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) in non-permissive environments are in practice conferred to an EU member state. The security rules foresee that the EEAS enters into administrative arrangements to address the respective roles, responsibilities, tasks, and cooperation mechanisms. The EEAS is also responsible for putting in place appropriate alert state measures in anticipation of or response to threats.

In an evacuation, the EU will draw up a list of so-called 'entitled persons'. Priorities are established based on different categories of relations with the EU, which can go beyond EU nationals, staff, and their families and extend to contractors and other persons involved with EU activities in the country. Responsibility to protect can also be argued with relation to broader categories of civil society in the country. The EU [Guidelines on the protection of Human Rights Defenders](#) identify ways and means to promote and protect human rights defenders in third countries within the Common Foreign and Security Policy. While not excluding evacuation being part of such efforts, it is not explicitly mentioned.

2. July-August: Summer 'sauve qui peut'

a) Moving out / moving in

With the troop withdrawal underway, the Taliban made further territorial gains and, by June, were [preparing offensives](#) towards key cities.^{xviii} NATO forces were also fast on the move – out of the country. The US having set the direction and the pace, Spanish and Swedish troops left Afghanistan in May. In mid-June, Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, the Netherlands, Romania, and Norway followed out. Towards the end of that month, over [4800 non-US forces had already left Afghanistan](#).^{xix}

"Mission accomplished. You have fulfilled your task." the last returning German soldiers were told as they arrived on Wunstorf airbase on 29 June. The day after, the last Italian and Polish troops returned home too. Early July, with the closure of its largest base, the Bagram airfield, the [US withdrawal was more than 90% complete](#). President Biden decided to accelerate further, moving the schedule for complete *troop* withdrawal to 31 August. Still, despite acknowledging that the Taliban was "at its strongest militarily since 2001", a full *civilian* retreat from Afghanistan was not being envisaged: the US administration and its allies were still in denial about the possibility of an imminent Taliban takeover.

Others were growing more concerned. Just weeks later, the UN Security Council was briefed on the "seismic tremor" of this swift withdrawal of international troops. As public scrutiny grew, more and more allies started encouraging their citizens to leave. On 14 July, the US decided to launch the 'Operation Allies Refuge', which would begin to evacuate at-risk Afghan civilians as of the end of the month. Yet preparations for large-scale airlift was not the order of the day. In fact, the one partner that seemed to anticipate the worst, France, met [criticism from its allies for doing so](#).^{xx} As of May already, France had told its citizens to leave and started evacuating hundreds of Afghans working for its embassy and French organisations. On 17 July, [remaining French citizens were given a final warning to leave](#) and a special flight out was organised.^{xxi}

b) Exit at gunpoint

Come August, and matters went from bad to worse. The Taliban advanced quickly, winning significant ground. With Herat and Kandahar already under siege, when Kunduz fell in the morning of 8 August, it seemed only a question of time before the Taliban would go for Kabul. [On 12 August, the US government decided to deploy 3,000 US combat troops to secure the airport](#); a number later expanded to 5,000: the evacuation of US embassy personnel, nationals and Afghans applying for protection had finally been decided.^{xxii}

Herat fell the next day, and everything accelerated. NATO's remaining civilian personnel relocated to the airport to prepare evacuations. As [the Taliban entered Kabul in large numbers on 15 August](#), Afghanistan's President Ghani fled, and a mad scramble for the airport started.^{xxiii} US and Taliban representatives met in Doha to negotiate the terms of safe departure, and US troops established security perimeters at the airport. On 17 August, NATO's chief civilian representative Stefano Pontecorvo tweeted: "[Runway in HKIA #Kabul international airport is open. I see aeroplanes landing and taking off #Afghanistan](#)".^{xxiv} The race against the clock to get as many out as possible had started.

Over the next ten days, an average of 120 flights per day would depart Kabul under the eyes of the world's TV cameras, and the thousands of Afghans massed around the airport. Unprepared as it was, it did not look pretty for anyone. The first few days, planes took off almost empty as all countries struggled to process documentation of would-be passengers. Yet with necessity and shared effort, efficiency soon picked up to evacuate more than 125,000 people in 14 days. While the US took on the main security tasks, according to NATO statistics, European allies conducted [40 per cent of the evacuation flights](#).^{xxv}

c) EU: making up for lost time

EU institutions had prepared no better than anyone else and seemed blindsided by the speed of events and decisions. The Integrated Political Crisis Response (IPCR) arrangements that monitor crises and support decision-making were never activated, neither before nor during the summer of 2021. From when the US announced the deployment of troops for the airlift to when the [Foreign Affairs Council \(FAC\) finally met by videoconference on 17 August](#), a full five days passed.^{xxvi} By then, member states were already expressing the necessity for EU coordination to supplement national, NATO and US efforts.

On 16 August, France activated the EU's Civil protection instrument to provide for coordination and co-financing of evacuation flights. At the FAC of 17 August, member states called for

solidarity in repatriating EU citizens and local staff. In the next few days, matters went quickly. The EU had no mission or operations plan ready, but what was lacking in formal planning and structures was made up for by information exchange, cooperation and de facto coordination.

The EU established a dedicated cross-institutions crisis cell comprising more than 100 staff, bringing together the External Action Service, the EU Military Staff (EUMS) and the Commission's [Emergency Response Coordination Centre \(ERCC\)](#).^{xxvii} EU staff was deployed to Kabul to the EU institutions' evacuation efforts and assist with on-the-ground coordination between member states and with the US and NATO (see Focus box C). Between 15 and 30 August, the EU effort provided support for the [evacuation of more than 17,500 people from Kabul](#), including 4,100 EU nationals and 13,400 Afghans.^{xxviii}

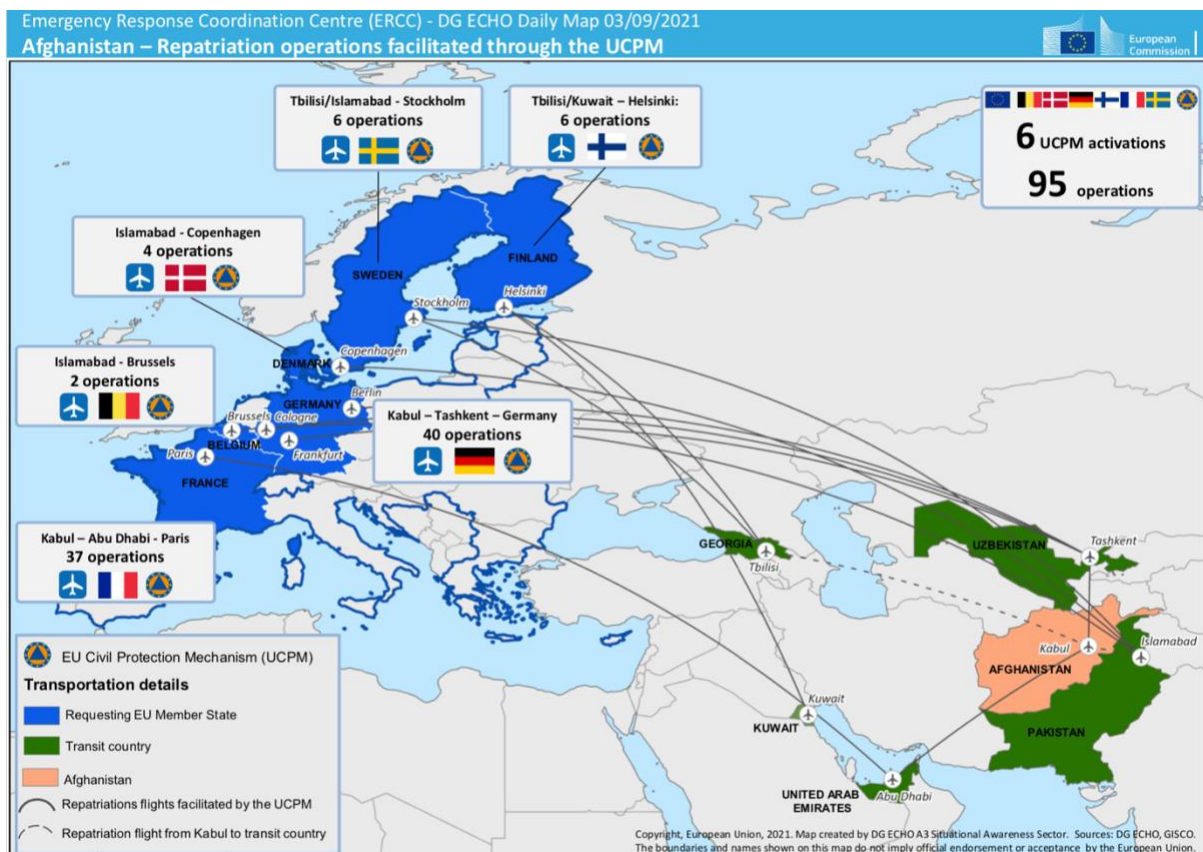
This effort included 520 EU staff and their families. Still, at least 300 Afghan personnel and their families who had been working with the former EU police training mission to Afghanistan (EUPOL) [could not be evacuated](#), according to the statement of the External Action Service to the European Parliament on [9 September 2021](#).^{xxix}

Focus box C: EU institutions' on-the-ground evacuation drama (15-25 August)

- When the Taliban entered Kabul on 15 August, EU institutions were largely unprepared. Neither central services in Brussels nor the EU delegation in Kabul was staffed and ready for an evacuation effort in the timeframe set by the US retreat and at the scale required by the EU's duty of care.
- A few uncertain days followed, informed as much by TV images as by reliable information on the ground. In Brussels, at EEAS headquarters, it was a time for improvisation. In Kabul, the EU Delegation swiftly relocated to the Hamid Karzai International Airport, where the three remaining staff set up at the makeshift French compound guarded by French special forces.
- On 19 August, the Director of Operations of the EU Military Staff was called to duty with the mission to lead the EU institutions' evacuation efforts and coordination with EU member states, the US and other actors in Kabul. The EU Ambassador was no longer present in Kabul, and a 'flag officer' was needed on the ground to coordinate with counterparts at similar level/rank.
- When the General arrived, on 20 August, the EU Delegation was comprised of a chargé d'affaires recently arrived, a DG ECHO official, two political analysts from EEAS, two Major rank officers also dispatched by EUMS to Kabul to reinforce the Delegation, and the regional security officer (the HRVP Special Envoy for Afghanistan was also present). Security and operational support were ensured by Belgian and French means.
- The EU Delegation had three priority groups of 'entitled persons' for evacuation: Priority 1 (Delegation staff, including local staff and their close families), Priority 2 (contractors for the Delegation), and Priority 3 (Legacy of [EUPOL](#) – local staff that previously worked with the mission), totalling around 2000 people.
- Given the situation on the ground, it was not possible to extract people from the city. A convoy system was therefore put in place. Civilian buses were hired to pick up entitled persons contacted and directed to a meeting point through WhatsApp groups. By agreement with the Taliban (through US intermediation), busses could pass through Taliban checkpoints based on their licence plates, the driver's identity and the number of people on board.
- Every country had their own system at the airport gates to signal to and physically extract people from the crowd (for instance, Belgians waved the Belgian flag). A security check was performed outside the gates, whereas the identity verifications would take place inside the airport in conditions of great human drama. Entitled persons would be directed onwards to the planes; non-eligible persons (e.g. extended family) would in principle be ousted again.

- With thousands massed for days at the gates in brutish conditions, the sight, sound and smell of human suffering and despair mixed with a sense of uncertainty and threat. Thanks to a “Team Europe” approach, progress on the EU’s priority lists 1 and 2 was relatively fast. The General, the *chargé d'affaires* and the DG ECHO official worked as a whole decision-making team.
- In the early stages of the evacuation, European and US planes were leaving almost empty. Through ad hoc coordination put in place with EU member states, evacuees were soon efficiently distributed towards all available seats. Similarly, coordination between EU militaries played a key role in making the convoy model work, with multiple member states participating with resources such as force protection, transportation, security checks and logistics in the efforts of others.
- By 24 August, reports emerged of possible infiltrations in the airport, and the risk of an attack was growing. It was decided that the night of 26 to 27 August would be the last with EU evacuees to leave. Part of the EU team left on 25 August with the last plane of the Belgian contingent. The following day, another part left with the Italian contingent, marking the end of the evacuation of the EU Delegation.
- From the accounts we have gathered, a high percentage of eligible persons in the Priority 1 and Priority 2 groups were evacuated. In contrast, the evacuation rate from the Priority 3 group was low. After initial difficulties to find EU countries ready to take in evacuated EU local staff these were in the end flown to Spain and then resettled in various countries.

Focus box D: What worked: EU Civil Protection repatriation flights



PART 2 – LESSONS LEARNED: THREE FACTORS IN FAILURE TO PREPARE FOR EVACUATION

[“We all misread the situation”](#) – German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas' assessment on 16 August has the merit of honesty and conciseness.^{xxx} And simply put, he is right. But the economy of words should not stand in the way of deeper scrutiny of the errors committed. Three factors of failure jump to the eye from the assessment of those critical months: a collective failure of anticipation, the dependence on the US and NATO groupthink, and the absence of European will and capabilities.

1. A collective failure of anticipation

The seed of failure in Afghanistan's endgame lies no doubt in the Trump administration's Doha agreement of February 2020. At this pivotal moment, the US switched from a condition-based departure to a calendar-based retreat, and the Taliban must have realised that if they were prepared to both hold their ground and fight, they would prevail.

When President Biden set the final date for exit in April 2021, the Taliban got confirmation that the US primary objective had become that they “wanted out”. Securing peace, stability and other gains from the last 20 years consequently came second, and in such a strategic setting, the chances of achieving secondary aims are greatly compromised.

a) Intelligence failures

In the subsequent unfolding of events, the lack of reliable intelligence and a long history of misreading the situation on the ground proved critical. From what one can judge, the intelligence provided diverging assessments of the consequences of a full troop withdrawal. On the one hand, there were clear warnings of the risks of a Taliban overrun in publicly available intelligence reports, in the press and within the international community. On the other, it seems that up until the final days allied governments were advised that it would take months before the Taliban would seize Kabul.^{xxxi}

Apparently, as late as 11 August, the US intelligence community assumed that it would take 30 to 90 days before Kabul would fall, a timeframe they had even estimated to be six months in June. Yet, the US top general, Mark Milley, chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, has also stated in front of the US Senate that it had been his personal opinion that [“at least 2,500 US troops were needed to guard against a collapse of the Kabul government and a return to Taliban rule”](#).^{xxxii}

European intelligence services likely offered no better advice. The German Federal Intelligence Service (BND) is said to have advised the Bundestag in June that a victory for the Taliban was to be expected [only in 18 to 24 months](#).^{xxxiii} In that regard, Germany's public broadcaster Deutsche Welle proved more prescient with an article on 14 April, the day the Biden administration announced the unconditional withdrawal of all US troops, titled: [“Has the US just handed over Afghanistan to the Taliban?”](#).^{xxxiv}

b) Denial of the worst case

If intelligence services proved of little help, based also on likely feedback loops between political expectations and intelligence reports, the true mistake lies in not *planning* for the possible collapse of Afghan security and state functions. Scenario planning goes to the heart of what the military does. For a military organisation like NATO, the lack of planning for worst-case outcomes is startling. It goes to show the extent to which its military planning is dependent on the political signals sent. Ultimately, it's this absence of strategic anticipation that caught allies and the international community so unprepared for the events in August.

In fairness, NATO SG Stoltenberg warned, already in November 2020, that US withdrawal might cause the situation on the ground to rapidly deteriorate. Still, the emphasis remained on the role Afghan security forces would play. The US and NATO were trapped and blinded, it seems, not only by their massive investments and association with the Afghan army but also their own narrative of success in Afghanistan. In summit after summit – Prague (2002), Chicago (2012), Cardiff (2014), Warsaw (2016) and London (2019) – NATO leaders had made Afghanistan a test case of the alliance's operational engagement abroad. Even at the meeting in June 2021, just weeks before the final debacle, NATO leaders held up hope for a lasting inclusive political settlement and a new chapter “safeguarding the gains of the last 20-years”.

Envisaging failure is never easy. Also, outside the conclaves of NATO, few Europeans can claim better foresight, be it individually or collectively as the EU. A lack of awareness and intelligence regarding what was happening, together with, to the extent there were signs, unwillingness to acknowledge them politically, clearly contributed to the EU's failure to imagine and prepare for the Taliban's quick arrival in Kabul. However, in the case of the EU, there is also a prominent third reason, the implicit division of labour with NATO: Afghanistan had been the US and NATO's endeavour and responsibility, not the EU's war.

2. NATO groupthink and dependence on the US

In many ways, from the first day till the last, Afghanistan was America's war. Europeans went along in 2001, in the words of German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, because of "*unrestricted – I emphasise – unrestricted solidarity*" with the US. But over the 20 years of engagement in Afghanistan, they never had any real say. Successive strategies, drawdowns, surges, negotiations, and peace deals were always decided by Washington and according to US domestic politics and calendars. It is not that NATO allies shied away from the collective effort: alongside the 2,500 American soldiers who died fighting, 1,144 other allied soldiers laid down their lives in Afghanistan. And when Presidents Trump and Biden set their final dates for departure, European allies had more troops in Afghanistan than the US. Still, they were hardly consulted.

a) When the US decides...

In retrospect, this dependency on US conduct and decisions is one of the most remarkable aspects of the allies' engagement and also a direct source of failure. In a 120-page report from August 2021, the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR)

provides a scathing assessment of the US military and government departments' capacity to understand the Afghan context and define, coordinate, and execute workable strategies.

One of the most candid assessments is that of Lt. Gen. Douglas Lute, who was US Deputy National Security Adviser for Iraq and Afghanistan (2007-2013) and Permanent Representative to NATO (2013-2017):

« We were devoid of a fundamental understanding of Afghanistan. [...] We didn't have the foggiest notion of what we were undertaking. It's really much worse than you think. There [was] a fundamental gap of understanding on the front end, overstated objectives, an overreliance on the military, and a lack of understanding of the resources necessary. »^{xxxv}

The numbers speak for themselves: the US spent an astounding \$837 billion on warfighting in Afghanistan and an equally incredible \$145 billion trying to rebuild the country.^{xxxvi} For over a decade, this spending surpassed every established threshold for aid saturation, even by as much as 5 to 10 times, with only one conceivable outcome: endemic corruption and the breakdown of self-sustained economic and societal structures.

b) ... NATO follows

These facts were in plain sight. Still, one would be hard-pressed to find European leaders from the past 20 years, be they German, British, or French, who can claim to have had the capacity to build a case and influence Washington on the course of action. Instead, for the time the Afghanistan commitment lasted, not only would the US call the shots, but the Europeans would also happily follow with NATO acting as the drive belt and repository of collective decisions.

This is another lesson of Afghanistan: it has confirmed the extent to which the alliance is premised on US leadership. Most other allies remain caught in herd mentality, not sufficiently capable of critical examination. At best, non-US allies have held a negative or 'caveat' power, a fact that in turn is deplored by the US as having "[hamstrung NATO's effectiveness and hindered their ability to make the most of coalition support](#)".^{xxxvii}

All considered, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that NATO proved dysfunctional as the locus of transatlantic political discussion, strategy and decision-making on Afghanistan. The final months were no exception. As NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg drily pointed out in reply to criticism ex-post, at the NATO Foreign and Defence Ministers meeting on 14 April, nobody spoke up against the withdrawal decision and calendar. When several allies finally pleaded to extend the timeline for evacuations at the meeting of NATO foreign ministers on 20 August, it was too late. The US stuck to its 31 August deadline, illustrating once again the Europeans' powerlessness with and without the US.

c) French exceptionalism

The clearest counterexample is France, which has often suffered criticism precisely for standing out. In 2012 France justified its decision to withdraw combat troops from Afghanistan by the need for resources in the Sahel. But it also came after having loyally followed the Obama administration's surge then drawdown plans, building up no doubt over the years the sentiment that they could not weigh in on strategy, decisions and outcomes.

Also, in Afghanistan's endgame, France showed a healthy dose of scepticism. They had no better intelligence than others, it is claimed, but they manifestly took [a more dispassionate view of it](#) when anticipating the consequences on the ground of US and NATO military withdrawal.^{xxxviii}

The contrast with Germany is stark. In June, [all three opposition groups in the German Bundestag](#) – the Greens, the Free Democrats, and the Left Party – filed motions relating to the need to evacuate local staff.^{xxxix} Critical minds spoke out in Germany, and in other European countries too, throughout the Afghanistan engagement. But taking a critical stance never was official policy: the sense of loyalty to a collective course of action, for good and for bad, and in some circles, infatuation with NATO was much stronger but ultimately proved also damaging.

Focus box E: US-NATO-EU failure matrix in Afghanistan's endgame

(To undergo graphic design)

	Anticipation		Execution	
	Intelligence	Decision-making		Operational capacity
US	<p>Over 20 years of presence, lack of deep understanding of Afghanistan and possibility to deliver outcomes</p> <p>Military and other actors put up some red flags</p>	<p>Domestic politics drove choices, w/o anticipating consequences</p> <p>Calendar-based withdrawal</p> <p>No early planning of civilian evacuation</p>	<p>Decisions driven by withdrawal deadline</p> <p>Redeployment of troops securing evacuation + safe departure negotiated w/ Taliban</p>	<p>Full spectrum of capabilities available</p> <p>Driving force of evacuation, incl. support to other nations</p>
NATO	<p>Lack of own intelligence and analysis</p> <p>Knowledge about the deteriorating situation amongst Allies</p>	<p>Dependence & group think. NATO repository of US decisions, not collective strategy and decision-making forum</p> <p>Failure to discuss and anticipate outcomes</p> <p>No early planning of civilian evacuation</p>	<p>Not tested</p> <p>Evacuation not conducted under NATO command and control</p>	<p>Not tested</p> <p>Relatively small operational role in final evacuation, limited to coordination</p>
EU	<p>Lack of own situational awareness</p> <p>To the extent signals, political unwillingness to acknowledge them</p>	<p>Wilfully chose not to engage ('not the EU's war'-attitude)</p> <p>Failure to discuss and anticipate outcomes</p> <p>No early planning of civilian evacuation</p>	<p>Crisis management structures inappropriate / not operational (e.g. IPCR not activated)</p> <p>Member states individual decision-making</p> <p>Informal staff-to-staff coordination at EU level and with member states proved helpful</p>	<p>EU not in capacity to conduct full evacuation (lack of standing forces & critical enablers)</p> <p>Some EU means activated but bulk of operations were national</p> <p>EU + MS showed solidarity and capacity to act jointly with convoy and transit model</p>

3. Absence of European will and capabilities

The marginalisation of Europeans in big decisions does not diminish their ownership in failure. European Council President Charles Michel regretted ex-post that the US "[made very few – if any – consultations with their European partners](#)" when the US decided to negotiate with the Taliban, and then to confirm the withdrawal.^{xl} But ultimately, Europeans are themselves responsible both for their commitment in Afghanistan and weaknesses in following it up.

At the post-mortem informal Council of Defence ministers on 2 September, HRVP Borrell stated, as in a late admission of responsibility, that "Afghanistan was not just an American war – the EU had important interests". Why then did not Europeans choose to prepare for Afghanistan's endgame and their exit collectively in the remit of the EU? The simple answer is that Brussels is rife with discussions of 'strategic autonomy' but still lacks the basic implements of that autonomy in terms of political will, military capabilities and appropriate decision-making structures.

a) The EU's choice to be weak

If they had taken ownership of the problem as of February 2020, President Michel and HRVP Borrell would have been well placed to coordinate EU positions and speak with US counterparts. Yet the fact remains that they neither did nor were expected by member states to do so, which goes to highlight the absence of both political will and empowerment at the heart of the EU institutions when it comes to foreign policy and security matters. A particularity of the Common Foreign and Security Policy is the shared responsibility and lead of several institutional actors, including the President of the European Council, the HRVP, the Commission and member states themselves.¹ It is difficult to see that any of those institutional actors lived up to those responsibilities in that period.

This is also true for Afghanistan's endgame and preparations for the consequences of NATO's 14 April withdrawal decision. In theory, there was nothing to stop the EU from envisaging a NEO situation and making contingency preparations either as a Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) operation or through the reliance on an ad hoc coalition of member states. The Treaty on European Union explicitly provides such mandates in its articles 43 and 44:

*"The tasks referred to in Article 42(1), in the course of which the Union may use civilian and military means, shall include joint disarmament operations, **humanitarian and rescue tasks**, military advice and assistance tasks, conflict prevention and peace-keeping tasks, tasks of combat forces in crisis management, including peace-making and post-conflict stabilisation."*

Yet, when and how would the EU even start considering this if the Afghan situation was barely considered in Foreign Affairs Councils? No doubt, informal and bilateral exchanges took place,

¹ Cf. [Article 26 TEU](#) "[...] If international developments so require, the **President of the European Council** shall convene an extraordinary meeting of the European Council in order to define the strategic lines of the Union's policy in the face of such developments."

And [Article 30 TEU](#) "1. **Any Member State, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, or the High Representative with the Commission's support**, may refer any question relating to the common foreign and security policy to the Council and may submit to it, respectively, initiatives or proposals. 2. In cases requiring a rapid decision, the **High Representative, of his own motion, or at the request of a Member State**, shall convene an extraordinary Council meeting within 48 hours or, in an emergency, within a shorter period.

but the overall picture of Council discussions in these critical months¹ reveals that Afghanistan was simply not a foreign policy priority for the EU executive. To the extent discussions took place, they would not engage methodically with the possible consequences of decisions. The focus would be on diplomacy, development, and human rights, not on risks and hard security implications.

The EU's lack of political will in security and defence goes arm in arm with an absence of strategic culture. One might think that the European's relative anaemia in NATO would be compensated by a more active stance in the EU, but it's the contrary. Whether by conscious choosing or unwitting osmosis, the collective choice is to be weak and underinvest in security and defence also as the EU.

Consider the [European Parliament's resolution](#) of 10 June, which with some foresight pointed to the "vacuum [from withdrawal] that in the worst-case scenario will be filled by the Taliban". It called "on the External Action Service, the Commission and the Member States to ensure the security of European forces and staff in Afghanistan [and to] *contribute funding for an enhanced security zone* [author's italics] to ensure a diplomatic presence after the withdrawal of troops". Implicitly, the view expressed is that the EU should not itself be an actor on the ground.^{xli}

b) Incapacity to act

Had contingency planning for evacuation from Kabul been on everybody's mind in April 2021, few would have envisaged it in the context of the CSDP. For that, the operational capacities are too weak, the procedural hurdles too high, and the gains of joint CSDP action too low. Formally, the EU's military level of ambition is to be able to deploy up to 60,000 troops within 60 days for at least one year. But that is a paper army, not a standing force, committed, trained and ready.

EU battlegroups do, intermittently, come into existence. For the second half of 2020, battlegroup *EUBG 2020-2* stood on standby with 4,100 soldiers. Built around the German *Division Schnelle Kräfte*, it brought together forces from Austria, Croatia, Czechia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Netherlands and Sweden, in principle ready to be deployed within 5 to 10 days of approval from the Council, for at least 30 days. As such, it is tailor-made for an evacuation-type scenario.

Yet EU battlegroups have never been used, and some doubt they ever will. They are not permanent standby forces but serve only for a 6-month rotation with frequent gaps in the roster. In fact, for lack of a successor, *EUBG 2020-2*'s standby period was extended into the first three months of 2021, but not beyond. The decision to deploy is also uncertain: not only is unanimity in the Council required but likely also national parliamentary approval from participating member states, making 'rapid reaction' a hypothetical concept.

We will never know if *EUBG 2020-2*, or its Italian-led successor *EUBG 2021-2*, would have been available had the EU wanted to plan a mission as of April 2021. Yet, what we do know is that ultimately what was at play in Kabul was a much broader range of capabilities than what the EU can muster, from intelligence to strike groups and a deep reserve of force in case

needed. Europeans were surprised positively by their capacity to mobilise strategic airlift, including through the EU, an improbable feat a few years back. But in the end, Chancellor Angela Merkel summed it up well in a frank answer on 16 August: "[Germany could only carry out the evacuation of its people with American help](#)".^{xlii}

c) Inability to decide

By nature, CSDP decision-making is an obstacle to rapid reaction: there is no escape from unanimity rule. Even in a scenario where the Council entrusts the operation to a group of member states, as is possible under Article 44, [established doctrine](#) has held until now that the 'general conditions for the implementation down to the operational planning phase (rules of engagement, CONOPS and OPLAN) would have to be agreed by unanimity'.^{xliii}

Decision-making processes can, to some extent, be accelerated with advance planning, operational scenarios and pre-identification of forces. As part of the CSDP's Level of Ambition, the EU Military Staff (EUMS) has developed illustrative scenarios for rescue and evacuation and humanitarian support. Still, these serve the purpose of capability development rather than operational planning. In April and August 2021, there were no readily available EU military concepts for a Kabul-type rescue and evacuation scenario, and for valid reasons as outlined.

Another example of the EU's unpreparedness for significant operations: the EU does not have readily available command and control (C2) structures for rapid reaction. The EU's permanent operational headquarter, the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC), is still in its infancy, with limited staff occupied running the EU's training missions. Activating one of the ad hoc OHQs (Paris, Potsdam, Rome, Larissa, Rota) offered by member states takes time and carries high start-up costs.

Ultimately, it's the EU's full crisis management readiness that got tested in August – and that proved deficient. The Integrated Political Crisis Response (IPCR) arrangements that support rapid and coordinated EU decision-making in complex crises were never activated. They should have been on 'monitoring mode' throughout the summer by any standard. The Political and Security Committee (PSC), which usually meets twice a week or more, was similarly dormant in August and only assembled in urgency when an extraordinary FAC had been called under the overflowing pressure from events.

In this final moment of failure, ad hoc and informal coordination across institutions and on the ground saved the day, paradoxically highlighting the EU's relevance. EU institutions should be thankful for the military and civil protection staff who are socialised to find solutions even within unprepared and piecemeal crisis management structures. In return, leaders must now heed the lessons and warnings for the future by delivering a step-change in the EU's capacity to act in crises.

Focus box F: Why the EU IPCR does not work

The EU institutions' (lack of) reaction to the unfolding of events in Afghanistan over the summer is a good starting point to identify current deficiencies. The centrepiece of the EU's crisis management

capacity is the so-called Integrated Political Crisis Response (IPCR) arrangement. Unbelievable as it sounds, the IPCR was *never activated* - at any of its operational levels – during the build-up to and unfolding of the Afghanistan crisis.

The IPCR currently has three operational modes: 1- a 'monitoring mode' ensuring basic information exchange; 2- an 'information-sharing mode' triggering the creation of analytical reports, investment into situational awareness and preparedness for possible escalation; and finally, 3- a 'full activation mode' involving the preparation of proposals for EU action to be decided upon by the Council or European Council. From an outside observer's standpoint, one would think it would have been active at least in mode 1, if not in mode 2, from the beginning of the summer (e.g. from the date of the European Parliament resolution mid-June) when risks associated with the withdrawal were more commonly identified, and swiftly scaled up to level 3 as of the beginning of August when these risks materialised.

Only on 18 August, when Afghanistan was added *in extremis* to the agenda of a ministerial IPCR meeting on migration flows from Belarus, did a discussion take place. The situation in Afghanistan was addressed under the guise of the latter point without the IPCR being ever formally activated. This was not uncontroversial, and at that meeting, Germany spoke out to regret a discussion "limited to a few remarks only", urging the Slovenian Presidency to convene without delay an IPCR meeting on Afghanistan. The presidency signalled openness to that, but in reality, it was so late in the day that other informal processes had already taken over, and evacuation efforts were underway already.

The assessment of IPCR is not unequivocally negative. In response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the French presidency decided on 27 February 2022 to activate the IPCR in full mode. In other emergencies such as the pandemic and the migration/refugee crisis, for which it has been active since 2015, the arrangement has also successfully served the function of bringing together EU institutions and member states in a common platform of information exchange and technical analysis, also on politically difficult issues. Yet what Afghanistan highlights is that the IPCR is a *reactive* instrument ill-equipped to anticipate and prevent crises and at times also deal with them. It is an *integrated* instrument in name only with major flaws in both ownership and activation. As it stands, the IPCR, no matter the mode of operation, can be triggered only by the Council's 6-month rotating presidency or following the invocation of the solidarity clause by a member state.

PART 3 – WHAT TO DO NOW: FOUR RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE EU AS A SECURITY PROVIDER

1. Giving full measure to the EU as a security organisation

The unfolding of events from April to August 2021 points to Europe's most profound problem in security and defence. Fundamentally, it is neither the capacity to plan a NEO mission nor force generation; it is the Europeans' *state of mind*. Looking after one's own security obviously demands military capabilities and decision-making structures. But ever since the 1998 Saint-Malo declaration put European strategic autonomy and capacity to act on the agenda, a primary question has remained unanswered: *do Europeans have the collective pride and self-esteem to provide for their own security?*

a) A “sea change” in EU security and defence?

The adopted Strategic Compass is intended as a forceful answer to Europeans' apparent irresolution. In his foreword, HRVP Borrell speaks of turning "the EU's geopolitical awakening into a more permanent strategic posture" with "robust capabilities and the willingness to use them against the full spectrum of threats.". The Compass itself speaks of a European Union committed to defending the European security order, invoking both partnership with NATO and the EU's own mutual assistance clause (article 42(7) TEU). The Strategic Compass goes on to pledge an ability to "act rapidly and robustly whenever a crisis erupts [...] with partners if possible and alone when necessary", including to rescue and evacuate citizens at risk based on new operational scenarios and the establishment of Rapid Deployment Capacity by 2025.

At no point before have the EU's security and defence ambitions seemingly been spelt out so ambitiously. Yet, the history of European defence is full of promises and plans that have come and gone. After the tragedies in the Balkans and being eclipsed by the US and NATO in Kosovo, the 1999 European Council in Helsinki set the EU Headline goal of being in a capacity to deploy 60,000 troops in 60 days. Only four years later, spurred on by the first autonomous EU-led operation Artemis in Congo, the EU launched the development of its 1,500 personnel strong Battlegroup concept. By now, Europeans know the most challenging part is to follow up.

b) Institutional leadership and responsibilities

In this regard, the EU institutions, and the HRVP and the External Action Service, in particular, must step up to overcome the failings of the past. Events in the run-up to the summer of 2021 highlight that bolstering the EU's capacity as a security organisation requires a more determined will to lead. The Foreign Affairs Council is the HRVP's principal operational tool, and he should consequently invest it entirely as a lieu of strategic anticipation and coordination of efforts. The HRVP should also make use of his seat at the European Council table, where top-level strategic decisions inevitably are taken, to push together with the Presidents of the European Council and Commission for a more anticipating and capable EU.

The pandemic and the current security crisis will have done their part to pull Europeans out of complacency and self-absorption. Yet developing the EU's strategic culture also requires institutional anchoring. Neither of the Presidents has military advisors, and the EU Military Staff, currently hidden away at the bottom of the EEAS, is too far from the decision-making table.

A more reactive and capable EU will also not happen without the strong buy-in from member states. In this regard, there was a positive learning experience from the evacuation of Afghanistan. In August 2021, Europeans discovered a burgeoning European operational "can do" when faced with imperative necessity. *In extremis*, gear wheels of action locked into position and began moving, communication lines opened, diplomacy deployed, planes and other strategic enablers combined. Crucially, there was also solidarity from one country to another, and EU means played a non-negligible role. In crisis after crisis, Europeans learn that a sum can be more than its parts.

Focus box G: An EU responsibility to protect?

“The EEAS crisis response mechanisms, our consular support and field security will also be reviewed and strengthened to better assist Member States in their efforts to protect and rescue their citizens abroad, as well as to support our EU Delegations when they need to evacuate personnel.” **Strategic Compass**

Afghanistan brought out essential questions of principle and operational capacity relating to the EU's role as a foreign policy actor and presence in some 140 countries around the world. The Strategic Compass promises increased coordination between the External Action Service and the Commission's crisis response mechanisms and national civil and military authorities to assist member states in their efforts to protect and rescue citizens abroad and support EU Delegations when they need to evacuate personnel.

However, the EU's 'duty of care' and responsibilities to protect and evacuate in the ultima ratio is not unambiguously defined (see Focus box B). There are several more profound questions to be answered, in particular in terms of:

- **Responsibility:** *Who does it extend to? How does the EU define 'local staff' to be protected? What about persons previously associated with EU missions and projects? What about human rights defenders, opposition leaders, vulnerable persons?*

- **Ambition:** *What kind of protection measures do the EU institutions envisage?*

- **Operational means:** *What instruments are available? What coordination mechanisms should be established with member states, e.g., issuing visas and relocation? How are costs borne?*

As a minimum, and in the short term, EU institutions should establish a cross-institutions evacuation cell (EEAS-Commission), tasked with constantly monitoring countries at risk and building a recognised 'eligible persons' picture. In a crisis, whether natural or manmade, this cell would act as a link with consular and civil protection authorities.

In terms of lessons for the future, Afghanistan also raises the question of whether the EU should not play a more substantial coordinating role in evacuation and resettlement, not only of own personnel and staff working for the EU but also of EU nationals as well as vulnerable persons such as human right defenders and opposition leaders.

c) The paradoxical mindset of member states

Developing the EU's capacity to act requires overcoming powerful counternarratives, such as the notion that the transatlantic space and European security are better off not having a capable EU. In the Baltics, a saying holds that the sound of NATO planes in the sky allows for a good night's sleep, not the distant Brussels babble. Undeniably, there is truth to that. However, what is not helpful is when this is seized upon as the pretext to pitch NATO and the EU against each other rather than recognising their strong complementarity as security organisations.

Though lauded at the time, when US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in 1998 drew up her “[three Ds](#)”-red line – *no decoupling, no duplication, no discrimination* – it proscribed further EU defence developments. Let the past be the past. In today's geopolitics, what sense does it make that “the EU should not “operate command structures” as she argued? ^{xliv} Still, these views remain deeply rooted and paradoxically, perhaps even more so in some EU member states than in the US. The need for reassurances in Central and Eastern Europe is understandable, less so is it that [Germany and Sweden](#) often seemingly do too. ^{xlv}

Another fallacy lies in calls for a capable EU that are not accompanied with the readiness to accept what it entails. France is the member state that pushes the most vigorously for EU strategic autonomy, in both economic and security terms. Yet France is often the first to resist taking the qualitative step from intergovernmental cooperation to integration in defence. Sometimes for a good reason, to avoid impeding necessary action, but frequently also out of grand but solitary ideas of its sovereignty.

On the opposite end, others demand rapid reaction capacity but remain inflexible on procedural aspects. By now, the EU has solid experience with training, advisory and capacity-building missions (European Union Training Missions (EUTM), EU Advisory Missions (EUAM) or EU Capacity Building Missions (EUCAP) for which there is usually ample time for careful planning. Rapid reaction is a different game. It is a paradox that several member states have been more than satisfied to participate in military adventurism in the context of NATO but remain reluctant to give the EU the most basic attributes of power to act. Or that member states that profess commitment to a 'single set of forces'-principle and count well over a million soldiers overall simply cannot muster a couple of thousand for EU readiness and action.

With today's urgency comes increasing recognition of the need to defend European interests and values also together in the EU. In Paris, there is a wish for something to happen on EU operational capabilities, adding to past years' progress on industrial cooperation. In Berlin, the announcement of a defence investment fund of 100 billion euros comes on top of a turn of rhetoric towards '*eigenständige Handlungsfähigkeit*'.^{xlvi} Strong Franco-German words often carry weight in the EU's construction, but alone, they will not deliver. For all Europeans to come onboard, a new euro-transatlantic settlement on Europe's security architecture is also required.

2. Clarifying EU-NATO complementarity at the highest level

It is tempting to think that all keys lie in NATO in European defence. As the war in Ukraine has dramatically highlighted, NATO remains Europe's bulwark against outside aggression. NATO is also where clarification and acceptance are now needed for the EU and NATO's respective – and complementary – roles as security organisations. Afghanistan and Ukraine should each on their own be reasons enough to clarify the division of roles and bring in a new era of cooperation.

a) Illusions of “unprecedented quality” cooperation

In her 2021 State of the Union speech, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced that she had agreed with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg the principle of “a new EU-NATO Joint Declaration to be presented before the end of the year”. Not only has this declaration not yet materialised, one can also doubt whether engagement between, on the one side, the NATO Secretary-General, and the other, the Presidents of the European Council and the European Commission and the HRVP, is at the level of what is needed.

The two previous EU-NATO declarations, from 2016 and 2018, pointed to cooperation “*unprecedented in its quality, scope and vigour*”^{xlvii} and served to give political impetus to

deeper relations in areas such as hybrid threats. Yet the generous wording cannot cover over for a fundamental unease in past years, not only in Afghanistan's context. Strong US leadership in transatlantic security has been embraced by many; to others, it has held Europeans back from taking their own responsibilities. At the political level, the Turkish-Cypriot conflict also stands in the way of synergies at many levels. Today, there is no meaningful cooperation even when NATO and the EU run parallel and seemingly complementary missions such as *Active Endeavour* and *EUNAVFOR MED* in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The war in Ukraine might now change all this. Not only is a more fundamental rethink of the relationship warranted, but it now appears also possible thanks to unprecedented engagement at the highest level.

b) Grand design from the top

The upcoming 2022 NATO Leaders' Summit in Madrid should be the occasion to forge "a new transatlantic deal" enshrining at leaders' level a bigger commitment of European allies in NATO but also the recognition of the EU's growing role in both overall resilience and crisis management in Europe's broader neighbourhood in conjunction with bilateral efforts.

The crisis in Ukraine, and the need to deal with it collectively, should not distract European allies from the fact that to many in the US, the containment of Russia is just a subplot to a looming confrontation with China requiring Europeans to drastically step-up efforts for their own security. Over the past months and years, there has been a marked change of tone from Washington now encouraging Europeans to define their own security interests and develop capacities to act on their own, not only in theory but also in practice. In a [joint statement](#) with French President Macron on 29 October 2021, President Biden spoke of "*the importance of a stronger and more capable European defence [that] is complementary to NATO.*"^{xlviii}

c) Combining EU and NATO strategies

It would have been a strategic mistake if European 'strategic autonomy' had been based on a philosophical turn inwards. That is not the path chosen by the Strategic Compass, which, in carefully chosen words, lays the foundation for a new grand design. The Strategic Compass repeatedly emphasises the EU's commitment to defend the European security order but also that a stronger and more capable EU will contribute to transatlantic security in complementarity to NATO, which remains the foundation of collective defence of its members.

NATO's Strategic Concept must now pick up the invitation to develop this grand new design, including more transatlantic burden-sharing from the EU. On its side, in developing its military capacity, the EU could emphasise how its new defence initiatives, such as the proposed EU Rapid Deployment Capacity, can, in certain circumstances, complement NATO's capacity to act. In future crises, the EU might be in a better position to act than NATO, and the existence of EU capabilities could enable swift action. To make this happen, clarity on the type of missions/areas that NATO will not undertake and where the EU could come in would be beneficial. Cooperation should also actively be explored in countering hybrid threats, emerging and disruptive technologies, cyber, space and maritime security.

3. Setting up a *standing* 'EU Rapid Deployment Capacity', now

EU defence and military crisis management capacities are, figuratively speaking, as *underpowered* as US forces are *overpowered*. What in the latter case has led to eagerness in the use of force and intervention from Iraq to Afghanistan results in the former's inability to act. It shouldn't be this way. On paper, the EU has a well-established capability planning process as laid out by the so-called Headline Goals. And by the 'single set of forces'-principle, what is available to NATO in terms of European military capabilities should also be there for the EU. Yet the reality is different: Member states are well-aware of needs, but unlike what they do to NATO, do not make means available.

a) Where does the Compass lead us?

The Compass' answer is both ambitious and concrete. It draws up action points with clear deadlines to address known failings in capabilities, decision-making, financing or command and control that today prevent the CSDP from acting rapidly and robustly whenever a crisis erupts.

The optimistic reading is that the Strategic Compass comes at the right time to build on a rising sense of urgency and 'can-do'. All things considered, there was a silver lining to the general unpreparedness and confusion in the evacuation from Kabul, as Europeans demonstrated an unsuspected capacity to deploy enablers and act flexibly and efficiently, uncovering perhaps the kernel of a rapid reaction capacity. Should further pieces fall into place by 2023-2025, as suggested by the Strategic Compass, the CSDP will be in a much better place.

On a more pessimistic note, a failure to implement and deliver on promises could again prove the predicament of the CSDP. A functioning rapid reaction capacity is like a system of gear wheels that each needs to be in position and drive action together. If one of the pieces is blocked, the whole system grinds to a halt. Hidden behind the Compass' confident language, fundamental questions remain about the EU's level of ambition and capacity to deliver, as discussions on an EU Rapid Deployment Capacity illustrated.

Focus box H: What's in the Strategic Compass?

- By 2025, an **EU Rapid Deployment Capacity**, allowing the swift deployment of a modular force of up to 5000 troops. Agreement on operational scenarios in 2022, live exercises by 2023.
- By 2025 substantially **reduce critical gaps on strategic enablers**, in particular, linked to the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity, such as strategic airlift, space communication assets, amphibious capabilities, medical assets, cyber defence capabilities and Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance capabilities
- By 2025, the **Military Planning and Conduct Capability** to be able to plan and conduct all non-executive military missions and two small-scale or one medium-scale executive operation/s, as well as live exercises. By 2030, ability to plan and conduct executive operations.
- By 2023, re-assess the scope and definition of **common costs to enhance solidarity and stimulate participation in military missions and operations**, as well as exercise-related costs.
- By 2023, decision on flexible modalities for the implementation of Article 44 of the Treaty on European Union, to allow a **group of willing and able Member States to plan and conduct a mission or operation for the EU**. Mutual support between CSDP missions and operations and European-led *ad hoc* coalitions.
- By 2023, agreement on a military concept for **air security operations**.

- By 2023, capacity to deploy a **civilian CSDP mission** of 200 fully equipped experts within 30 days, including in hostile environments.
- By 2023, strengthening the **EEAS Crisis Response structures**, including the Situation Room to enhance our capacity to respond to complex emergencies, including evacuation and rescue operation abroad, **in close cooperation with the Emergency Response Coordination Centre**.
- By mid-2023, work on upcoming proposals **for new financing solutions to facilitate Member States' joint procurement** of EU strategic defence capabilities.

b) When a Compass is not enough

At the post-Kabul stocktaking informal ministerial meeting in Brdo in September 2021, HRVP Borrell came up with [ideas for an Initial Entry Force](#) in the briefcase. In making its case, his pitch was to promise something different from the existing EU battlegroup forces: "We have to go for [something] more consistent and well organised, [...] all together all the time". It reflected the recognition that whereas battlegroups are subject to rotation every six months, the EU needs to have standing force available.^{xlix}

Member states' insistence on an EU Rapid Deployment Capacity built around "substantially modified battlegroups" is the first indication that new ambitions might not be effectively delivered upon. Another weakness in the concept is the early insistence on setting the size of the Rapid Deployment Capacity at 5,000 soldiers. The 'give the politicians a number to announce'-syndrome is one the EU has also known in the past. Yet, contrary to appearances, it does little to clarify the EU's level of ambitions: 5,000 soldiers can prove just as much a limitation as an ambition of military capacity. If all supporting and enabling functions are counted, a 5,000 force quickly yields little impact on the ground.

A more credible approach would have been to define the mission spectrum based on identified scenarios. Where many would have thought the EU would not realistically face a Kabul-type evacuation scenario again, the encirclement of Kyiv allows for a doubt. Is this a scenario where the EU should play a role, and if so, which ones and with what means? That is the essence of military planning. There is a range of scenarios, with similarities and differences, that the EU must consider: European soldiers or citizens in danger needing evacuation from failing states or war zones; humanitarian assistance and disaster relief; short term stability support to governments; initial entry awaiting follow-up forces...

The level of ambition is the first answer military planners need from the political leadership. What type of operations are we committed to and how much risk do we want to take on together? Seemingly, the Strategic Compass has hit on an old conundrum: promise too much or renounce on ambition? From the 1992 Petersberg tasks and the 2003 Headline Goal of 60 000 troops (15 brigades) available in 60 days to the 2016 Global Strategy speaking of "full-spectrum land, air, space and maritime capabilities, including strategic enablers", the EU has so far never been shy of making promises. Yet putting down words on paper is never difficult. It's following up on it.

This time, it seems that the EU, by setting an intermediate numerical goal with emphasis on rapid reaction, is going for a compromise. The proof, as always, lies in the pudding. In time, will the capacity be regarded only as a tool for drawing up scenarios and cataloguing

theoretically available forces, or will a modern, modular rapid reaction capacity effectively stand trained and ready for deployment on short notice?

c) Making the difference now: a Franco-German initiative

Even pre-Ukraine, there had been much talk of 'will' and 'mindset' in EU defence circles and at the political level. At different moments, European Council President Michel, Commission President von der Leyen and HRVP Borrell have spoken about '*will to do*' in defence, just as French President Macron has in the context of the French presidency of the Council. Therefore, now is the time also for member states that share this mindset to step up. As highlighted by [Sven Biscop](#), the missing piece for the Strategic Compass to be credible on the path it has taken is the creation of a *standing* EU rapid deployment capacity based on a set of permanent multinational formations.ⁱ

This integration step is the one member states have always been reluctant to make. True, specific bilateral initiatives (DE-FR; NL-BE; NL-DE; FR-BE) exist, and even multilateral ones, but they all fail on one or several of three critical tests: *scale*, *commitment to an EU framework*, and *effective existence*. To take just two examples, the German-initiated EUFOR Crisis Response Operation Core ([CROC](#)) has a critical mass of 6 member states and is developed within the EU treaties as a '*Permanent structured cooperation*,' but does not exist beyond scenarios and catalogues.ⁱⁱ The French-led European Intervention Initiative ([EI2](#)) very usefully brings 13 members together in strategic assessment and scenario discussions to lay the ground for future *ad hoc* coalitions but does not aim for more than this.ⁱⁱⁱ

When breakthroughs are needed in the history of European integration, eyes naturally turn towards France and Germany. Also here: what is required is that President Macron travels to Berlin, or Chancellor Scholz the other way to Paris, with an offer to establish a permanent bilateral/multilateral formation available to the EU. It need not be a creation *ex nihilo* and likely should not, but rather bring together modules of existing standing forces. Both France and Germany have experience in this direction: France with the creation of the Combined Joint Expeditionary Force ([CJEF](#)) with the UK, and Germany through the integration of the Dutch airborne brigade in its *Division Schnelle Kräfte* ([DSK](#)).ⁱⁱⁱ Importantly they also have it together, albeit small scale, with the recent launch of a joint tactical air squadron.^{iv}

The crux of an initiative is the commitment to the EU's Rapid Deployment Capacity. This should not be a one-way street. Standing forces are expensive. If these are to approximate the conditions of an EU standing force, the EU should shoulder the financial burden as it could through the [European Peace Facility](#). There is nothing outlandish in such a demand: it's the basic model of the EU's [rescEU](#) civil protection capacity in the civilian sphere.^{iv} As an EU initiative, it cannot be exclusive, other member states should have the possibility to add additional modules, but you need a core. Finally, in line with the 'single set of forces'-principle, such a formation could be made available also to NATO, but its commitment to the EU in case of need must be clear.

In line with the Treaties, CSDP decision-making would continue to require unanimity. Still, flexibility must be explored when a group of member states take the lead in an operation within Article 44, including a presumption of constructive abstention. Crucially, a standing EU Rapid Deployment Capacity would enable the External Action Service, the EU Military Staff (EUMS)

and national planners to credibly prepare for different intervention scenarios, but also the multitude of questions that ultimately condition the possibility of joint action: *Can a German transport plane convey Italian weapons; Irish doctors treat French wounded; Danish intelligence inform a military engagement of an EU ad hoc coalition it is not part of?* In times to come, a significantly beefed-up EU Military Staff must engage in planning with member states at an entirely different scale. The will to do also starts here.

4. Reshaping the EU's civilian-military crisis management architecture

In her 2021 State of the Union speech, Commission President von der Leyen proposed the creation of an EU *Joint Situational Awareness Centre*. In the Strategic Compass, a pledge is made to develop an EU *Single Intelligence Analysis Capacity* as a “single entry point for strategic intelligence contributions from Member States’ civilian and military intelligence and security services.” Undeniably, it reflects the understanding post-Afghanistan and Ukraine that something needs to change in the EU’s preparedness, information-gathering, and decision-making capacity ahead of and during crises.

Yet, though valuable and necessary, these proposals only address a fraction of the problem. Future crises will come in different forms – from security and hybrid threats to climate change – and they will come more often and intensely. If the EU is serious about its ambition as a security organisation and crisis manager, it is ripe for a new integrated crisis management architecture across EU institutions.

a) EU integrated crisis management

The pandemic has created political momentum to look with new eyes and ambition at the EU's inter-institutional crisis management architecture. In 2018, Chancellor Merkel and President Macron both proposed the creation of a 'European Security Council', which surprisingly, given its instigators, was neither worked out in detail nor followed up on. In December 2021, the European Council called for strengthening the EU's crisis response and preparedness, and the Council will review by June 2022 whether the IPCR arrangements are fit for purpose.

What is needed is a “Copernican revolution” where executive capacities are put at the centre of the system. The Commission and the EEAS should have the lead not only in delivering analytical work but crucially also in anticipating, preparing, activating and day-to-day running of crisis platforms. The buy-in of member states remains essential, and that is why the work should be led by a 'double-hatted' European Emergency Response and Security Coordinator, at the Director-General level, in charge of centrally coordinating the Commission's efforts and of chairing inter-institutional crisis meetings. At the technical level, such meetings have a flexible, hands-on format bringing together affected member states, relevant Commission and EEAS services, EU agencies and other key actors depending on the centre of gravity of the crisis.

Still, in major crises, decision-making inexorably is *Chefsache*. At the very top, only the European Council can be the place of decision-making, which is also an essential condition

for political buy-in from member states. Merkel and Macron's proposals can be revisited to create an 'Emergency Response and Security Council' -format convened by the President of the European Council upon recommendation of any member state or other EU institution or with the activation of the EU's solidarity clause (Article 222 TFEU) or mutual assistance clause (Article 42.7 TEU). [Appropriate decision-making rules](#) for crisis management also need to be developed, identifying situations where unanimity is required and where it should not be the rule. Ultimately, this might require Treaty changes.

Finally, there is a need for stronger centralisation also within the Commission. Already today, as part of DG ECHO, the [Emergency Response and Coordination Centre \(ERCC\)](#) assists the IPCR by providing essential capacities and cross-sectoral coordination with other crises response instruments.² In anticipation of the broader needs of crisis management, crisis coordination and the ERCC should be brought in as a central service and directly linked to the Commission Presidency and Secretariat-General. It would be led at the DG level by the 'European Emergency Response and Security Coordinator' and entrusted at the political level to an Executive Vice-President of the Commission, working alongside the HRVP for external crises. All three would be meeting and reporting in the European Council's 'Emergency Response and Security Council' -format.

b) Making civilian and military capabilities work together

Integrating civilian and military capabilities and efforts is both a challenge and a condition of success. The EU must aim for structures that are flexible and agile enough to seamlessly combine different civilian and military instruments and resist fragmentation into other lines of command, operational centres and disjointed efforts on the ground.

The ideal for EU civilian-military cooperation can be envisaged with the image of a 'single building'. In this image, civilian and military staff occupy separate floors reflecting their different legal bases, remits and operational instruments. Yet, as the key to effective, joined-up action, they have shared spaces for operation floors or situation rooms (a joint canteen would likely also help socialising and develop a common crisis management culture).

The 'single building'-approach should not prevent each component from having dedicated intermediary control structures, such as the Political and Security Committee's (PSC) role in ensuring political oversight and direction of military crisis management operations. What matters is that the chains of command are short and efficient and go to one single political authority, which would be the Emergency Response and Security Council (European Council).

Overall, both communities would stand to benefit. Today, EU military structures and expertise are, figuratively speaking, stowed away somewhere at the bottom of the EEAS, with little opportunity to input upwards to the EU leadership, resulting in today's lack of strategic culture. Civilian capacities such as civil protection, which an increasing number of severe catastrophes has repeatedly stretched, would benefit from developing military contact points in member

² The current structure reflects the idea that there is synergy with humanitarian aid, which is correct to the extent that the ERCC and civil protection mechanism are enablers and service providers for humanitarian efforts, for instance, by being capable of organising an air bridge. Yet the synergy is often more superficial than one thinks. The EU's humanitarian operations consist mainly of channelling funds, as the world's biggest donor, to projects implemented by partner organisations.

states.³ resulting also in a stronger capacity to act. In this regard, the Kabul evacuation provided a positive learning experience of integration of civil and military means, such as when the EU Civil Protection Mechanism contracted with the [European Air Transport Command](#) for evacuation flights.^{lv}

Future sharing of means need not be limited to operational structures, it could also extend to capabilities. The EU Civil Protection Mechanism has so far relied on Member States' resources, but experience from the COVID-19 crisis and previous crises shows that increased response capacity requires own assets. Whereas the debate on EU-owned military assets seems some time off, the EU's Civil Protection Mechanism is being reinforced financially and investing in emergency response infrastructure and transport.

³ Following a request for assistance through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, the [Emergency Response Coordination Centre \(ERCC\)](#) mobilises means through a direct link with national civil protection authorities. Specialised teams and equipment, such as forest firefighting planes, search and rescue, and medical teams can be mobilised at short notice for deployments inside and outside Europe. The Mechanism would benefit from also having military contact points in member states, which is currently not foreseen by the Regulation.

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