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Soldiers out, civilians left behind

Lessons from Kabul as the EU sets its Strategic Compass

A report commissioned by the Greens/EFA International Cluster

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.ⁱ 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.

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