

Paris, Berlin, Rome, Madrid. May 2020

Dear Colleagues, Dear Josep,

I.

COVID-19 has struck the world and our societies in an unprecedented manner. The consequences will be immense, both today and in the years to come. More than ever, we have to live what lies at the heart of our European Union: an unflinching solidarity with each other and an unwavering commitment to our common European values.

Few organisations are better equipped to deal with such a multifaceted crisis than the European Union with the many tools at its disposal. Our reactions to the COVID-19 crisis have demonstrated that, although there is still room for progress, we were determined to manage these tremendous challenges together as a Union. Our Armed Forces have been instrumental in helping to deal with the challenges posed – both in Europe and beyond. Today, the effects of the pandemic have already started aggravating existing conflicts and crises, further weakening fragile states and putting additional pressure on already strained systems and regions.

Security and Defence must therefore remain a top priority. We want to live up to our responsibilities and be able to face present and upcoming challenges, at home and abroad. Hence, we have to maintain, strengthen and develop our ability to act and react autonomously, as a Union, and in the spirit of solidarity or aid and assistance, as appropriate, whenever necessary. Enhancing our freedom of action and developing necessary capabilities are key. This means that we will have to strengthen and deepen the tools and processes launched over the past four years, in the strategic, capability and operational domains.

We, the Ministers of Defence of France, Germany, Italy and Spain, are committed to our path of increased cooperation in the field of security and defence. The pandemic highlights that we have to significantly intensify our efforts and to strive towards a more integrated, effective and capable European Union in the international sphere.

II.

1. Enhancing solidarity and resilience of the EU and the EU Member States

Member States' Armed Forces and their capabilities primary mission is continuously to stand ready to engage against any possible threat. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, available defence capabilities proved to be effective also in supporting civil crisis management mechanisms. We should therefore intensify our contributions to the already ongoing reflections on a more ambitious and wide-ranging crisis management system within the EU. The PESCO framework could also be mobilised, in particular existing PESCO projects that could be further enhanced.

Another lesson we collectively identified is the importance of European solidarity to act and react to crises. A key work, in that regard, will be the operationalisation of the Article 42(7) TEU. Regular scenario-based discussions, wargames and exercises¹ could help reach a common perspective on the possible threats and bolster the political interactions among our capitals. This work could be articulated with reflections on the activation of article 222 TFEU.

Additionally, we have to improve significantly our ability to counter hybrid-, disinformation- or cyber-attacks, including the enhancement of the communication networks of the European Institutions and the Member States as well as their cyber-interoperability, security and resilience, as stated by the European Council in June 2019. In particular, the possibility to communicate in a classified environment has to be enhanced.

Furthermore, we have to strengthen our strategic communication towards our citizens and partners and elaborate a common strategy to counter hostile and/or false narratives, in cooperation with NATO and other institutions. This includes providing more visibility to practical examples of European solidarity.

2. Strengthening PESCO as the central political framework for European defence cooperation

PESCO is the key framework for European defence cooperation. The 2020 Strategic Review is a critical opportunity to reflect on our achievements and identify where more has to be done. In the second phase of PESCO (2021-2025) we must deliver, both on commitments and on projects, in particular regarding military operations, where significant progress has to be done.

To this end, we should focus on the implementation of the twenty more binding commitments, especially the operational ones and those related to the European Defence Technology and Industrial Base (EDTIB). The annual National Implementation Plans should remain the central tool for evaluation and should be focused on and addressed at the right political level, while ensuring the appropriate level of granularity in the information provided. Reflections on incentives to fully implement our commitments should be further pursued.

The selection process of new projects as well as the assessment of the on-going ones must be updated and sharpened, in close coordination with Member States. CARD and PESCO projects' selection processes must be aligned, while ensuring the possibility to exceptionally submit projects every year. Highest quality standards have to be the benchmark. Projects should deliver visible and short-term operational output in order to support the EU CSDP military Level of Ambition. Synergies between projects should be leveraged wherever possible. Projects that will not be delivering as expected should be either revived or terminated, in full respect of the decision-making autonomy of each project. Suitable PESCO capability projects can provide a first vision of EDF projects and should benefit from the EDF bonus, if selected in full respect of the EDF regulations and procedures, in order to achieve an ambitious PESCO.

The still open issue of Third States' participation in PESCO projects must be solved as soon as possible. The current proposal, put forward by the Finnish Council Presidency, should be our common agreement. This balanced compromise is in the interest of all participating Member States and of

¹ Such tabletop exercises should cover all possible worst-case scenarios of crisis.

possible partners. We fully support the efforts of the Croatian presidency to provide the right explanations and assurances regarding the security and defense interests of those Member States who disagree with this proposal.

3. Reducing our critical dependencies, reinforcing the European Defence Technology and Industrial Base and enhancing our capabilities

The ongoing COVID-19 crisis demonstrates the need for a stronger Europe that should control key technologies and production capabilities, including the military ones. According to the New Industrial Strategy for Europe, this implies the reduction of dependencies, filtering of foreign direct investments, support for disruptive technologies, strengthening of synergies between defence and civil industries and enhanced use of financial tools. Building Europe's industrial, technological and digital sovereignty requires us to link our economic policies even stronger with our security interests.

The European Defence Fund (EDF) is key to financing and fostering defence research and capability development that will reinforce our ability to act and to face future military crises and global threats. We therefore advocate for an ambitious EDF budget as a priority in the defence area and a swift adoption of the EDF regulation, in full respect of the discussions on the Multiannual Financial Framework. The EDF will contribute to supporting the European economy and the EDTIB, especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Incentivising cooperation allows the leverage of synergies and a more efficient allocation of resources.

The role of the European Defence Agency (EDA) must remain central as a cooperation platform in order to stimulate further cooperation in the field of defence, contributing to the reinforcement of the EDTIB.

Additionally, we should make sure that this year's first official CARD cycle identifies critical areas where Europeans should develop common capabilities.

With a view to our single set of forces, we need to plan and develop our defence capabilities strategically to be able to act with real operational output and to meet our ambition for CSDP and European operations, thus contributing to European defence. Therefore, a political guidance should be coordinated within the Council structures, taking into account the military expertise. Coherence between EU and NATO capability processes should continue to be pursued.

4. Strategic Compass: progressing towards a greater common understanding of the threats and challenges we face and how to tackle them

We are convinced that we need a greater common strategic understanding of what we want to be able to do as Europeans in security and defence. We are therefore committed to the development of a "Strategic Compass", which will further specify and operationalise the level of ambition defined by the EU Global Strategy. This strategic dialogue shall build on a global and comprehensive analysis and assessment of common threats and challenges at the EU level, which is to be delivered in the second half of 2020, in complement to the envisaged work on defence solidarity.

This Strategic Compass will improve our ability to act swiftly and decisively, if and when European actions are necessary, and could contribute to building a common strategic culture that could connect and get national perspectives closer, in complementarity to NATO. It will also provide transparency

and contribute to give European citizens and partners a clear view of EU's objectives and ambition in security and defence. Overall, the Strategic Compass will make European defence more effective and contribute to a "more sovereign" Europe in security and defence.

Work on the existing defence initiatives should be continued, thereby also feeding into the process of discussing and formulating the Strategic Compass and vice versa.

5. Strengthening our operational commitment

Strengthening our ability to protect and defend our citizens, our interests and our values, while supporting our partners should remain our priority.

Building on the long experience gathered in the numerous EU missions and operations over the past years, as well as the momentum created by our engagement in the Sahel region, e.g. through EUTM-Mali, and by the launch of Operation EUNAVFOR MED Irini, we should keep reinforcing military CSDP. This could range from the chain of command to the implementation in the field and to enhancing CSDP missions and operations' resilience. This is key for the security of our armed forces and for our credibility.

We should also tackle the issue of force generation, notably by ensuring a more regular follow-up of these issues at political level with the aim to reach a satisfactory level of participation for each Member State, based on its own financial and operational constraints.

Strengthening the European Command and Control structures (EU C2) is fundamental to tackling the threats and challenges we are facing. The current context undoubtedly calls for a sound EU military expertise embodied by the EU Military Staff (EUMS). The EUMS should be able to take on new challenges and missions, entrusted with a coherent responsibility over the continuum operations-concept-capability development. It should also support the Political and Security Committee, the EU Military Committee and the institutions. In this regard, we support the gradual enabling of the MPCC, to be further determined in the forthcoming review. The MPCC should be further developed, taking into account the lessons learnt from the current COVID-19 crisis, and it should take responsibility for the operational planning and conduct of all non-executive military missions and two executive military operations. In addition, we should review the EU C2 with regard to its suitability across the entire operational spectrum of the EU Level of Ambition.

The European Peace Facility should be available from January 2021, enabling us to provide our partners with the full spectrum of military equipment they need for their armed forces, providing a solid financial mechanism for the common costs of CSDP operations and missions and overcoming the geographical limitation of the African Peace Facility wherever is deemed necessary by the Council. This will make our support to partners even more effective and enhance our credibility, also in view of future immense crises like COVID-19.

As a global security provider, the EU has a strong role to play also in the field of maritime security. The "Coordinated Maritime Presences" concept should be swiftly tested through a pilot project in the Gulf of Guinea, before considering its extension to other geographical areas.

Taken together with other EU instruments, these tools would support the EU's integrated approach.

6. Improving the coherence of EU tools

Coherence of EU defence initiatives is key in order to guarantee that they are mutually beneficial and reinforcing to unfold their full potential. Building on HR/VP reports on coherence, in particular this year's report, we should further increase synergies and ensure an adequate balance between CSDP, other EU instruments and policies and intergovernmental defence initiatives. Improving both the ambition and consistency of EU action in the field of security and defence should be one of the objectives of the Strategic Compass. In particular, we should consider, if appropriate, the next CDP revision being carried out after a new Progress Catalogue in 2022 and the work on the Strategic Compass. The CDP must remain a result-oriented tool, with a strong guidance and political endorsement.

We should also enhance coordination between EU Institutions (the EEAS - including the EUMS, the Commission and the EDA in particular) so that they can provide their specific expertise, in order to make the EU decision-making processes and EU capability development more effective, efficient and comprehensive.

7. Cooperating with NATO and partners

Strong and transparent partnerships are of great importance for our action. The COVID-19 crisis highlighted, once again, the relevance of a close coordination between the EU and its partners, especially with NATO, to bring an effective answer to common challenges.

NATO remains the cornerstone of collective defence. We therefore continue to be committed to strengthening the European pillar within NATO as well as to exploring ways of reinforcing EU-NATO cooperation, which remains key to our overall security, building on the two EU-NATO Joint Declarations. We should reflect and discuss how to make EU-NATO cooperation more substantial.

We should also take forward the cooperation in security and defence with other partner organisations, in particular with the UN, and partner countries, in full conformity with the decision-making autonomy of the EU.

III.

This is how we envision the upcoming steps leading to a stronger European defence.

The COVID-19 crisis highlighted that the safety and security of European citizens is indeed a global challenge, one that calls for more solidarity, more resilience and more sovereignty. This requires strong and effective instruments, solid processes and pragmatic and coherent cooperation frameworks. A strong European defence is critical in this process and adequate internal communication is vital to explain its relevance to our citizens.

Today more than ever, we need to allocate the necessary resources to our defence, both at national and EU level, and to strengthen our efforts to be able to face future crises. It will also reinforce our credibility as Allies and partners.

In the end, the ongoing pandemic crisis, while being a catastrophe claiming thousands of our citizens' lives, should represent, at the same time, a reminder for the European Union of where our priorities lie. And these, we should grasp together.

We are very much looking forward to discussing these thoughts soon with all EU colleagues at the next Defence Ministers' meeting.


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To

EU Defence Ministers

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