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A NEW STRATEGY FOR ANOTHER EUROPE: a Southern European contribution to the European Security Strategy

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Europe's changing geopolitical environment requires a new European Security Strategy (nESS) that strengthens territorial defence while also protecting the networks and societies that sustain it. It should translate Southern Europe's geography, experience and capabilities into European public goods and help build a common security culture.

This *Nota Internacional CIDOB* proposes a 360-degree approach organised around three interdependent dimensions: territory, strategic flows and societal resilience; a lasting political process that connects priorities with responsibilities, capabilities, financing and review mechanisms; and four initiatives to give this contribution practical form.

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The new European Security Strategy (nESS) must strengthen territorial defence while protecting the networks and societies that make it sustainable. Southern Europe can help turn this principle into choices: what does the EU protect, which capabilities it develops and how member states share responsibility. The goal is not to redirect attention from East to South, but to translate regional capabilities into European public goods. With that in mind, nine think tanks from seven Southern European member states came together to explore a Southern European contribution to the new strategy.

The new European Security Strategy (nESS) must clarify the EU's position towards the United States and China and, crucially, connect political priorities to instruments, capabilities and resources.

The input from Southern Europe could be to (1) contribute to a better security culture; (2) broaden the understanding of security through three dimensions: territorial defence, strategic flows and societal resilience; and (3) respond to the implementation and governance problem. Identifying the Mediterranean as a strategic space exemplifies how southern EU member states can contribute to security. Finally, this policy paper suggests four initiatives that Southern European member states can introduce to implement their vision in the new European Security Strategy.

A changed geopolitical context requires a new strategy

Ursula von der Leyen referred to the nESS in her last State of the Union address. Before that, the 2003 European Security Strategy had reflected confidence in Europe's prosperity, security and capacity to shape its international environment. By 2016, however, successive crises within and around the EU had led to a more cautious outlook. The EU Global Strategy responded with principled pragmatism, resilience and strategic autonomy, seeking to reconcile European interests and values with growing external constraints.

The Strategic Compass, adopted in March 2022 shortly after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, translated these concerns into an action plan for European security and defence. But subsequent political change in the United States has further challenged assumptions about the durability of the transatlantic security relationship.

The nESS must therefore be more than another diagnosis of Europe's security environment. Power politics is back at the centre of global affairs, the US security guarantee is less axiomatic, US-China competition is reshaping the international system, economic interdependence is increasingly weaponised, and the boundaries between internal and external security, as well as war and peace, are blurring. Against this background, the strategy must clarify the EU's position towards the United States and China and, crucially, connect political priorities to instruments, capabilities and resources. Otherwise, it risks becoming a collection of bureaucratic deliverables rather than a genuine grand strategy (Biscop 2026). A Southern European vision of the strategy could contribute to its legitimacy, implementation and political ownership.

A common security culture through Southern European cooperation

The EU is a security community in which relations among member states are governed by law, institutions and common practices. And the use of force between them has become unthinkable. Yet this process of integration remains incomplete in foreign, security and defence policy, where national vetoes, bilateral bargaining and changing political priorities continue to limit collective action.

The problem is that member states lack sufficiently reliable expectations about how national interests will be reconciled when crises arise. Cooperation becomes fragile when each crisis reopens the terms of solidarity and governments treat security as a succession of transactions rather than a continuing commitment. Deepening requires embedding national choices in collectively agreed objectives and making solidarity credible across governments, crises and geographical theatres, despite national interests.

This is relevant for Southern Europe because they contribute to deterrence on Europe's eastern flank, but their experience of European responses to migration, maritime insecurity, climate emergencies and instability in the Southern Neighbourhood has often been uncertain or predominantly national. A credible security community must avoid creating hierarchies of insecurity in which some threats generate automatic solidarity while others remain primarily the responsibility of the most exposed states.

Southern Europe does not constitute a homogeneous strategic bloc. Greece is particularly attentive to Turkey and the Eastern Mediterranean; Spain, to Morocco and instability in the Sahel; Italy, to the central Mediterranean; and Portugal, to the relationship between Atlantic and Mediterranean security. Croatia and Slovenia connect the Mediterranean to the Western Balkans. France, meanwhile, as a nuclear power and P5,

has a unique role within Europe, combining European priorities with global ones, with a particular focus on the Indo-Pacific while its influence in Africa has steadily waned over recent years. Therefore, Southern European cooperation must be built around selected priorities rather than assumed to reflect a common threat assessment or a permanent voting bloc.

The case for cooperation rests on overlapping exposures and complementary capabilities, not identical interests. Maritime routes, ports, submarine cables and other critical infrastructure connect Southern European countries to the wider European economy. Climate shocks, energy and commercial disruption, instability in North Africa, the Sahel and the Middle East, and migration and human mobility affect the different states in different ways. But the knowledge, experience and capabilities of Southern European countries in dealing with them can contribute to common security.

Such cooperation could also help overcome an increasingly artificial distinction between Europe's eastern and southern theatres. Russia operates in Africa and the Mediterranean; China invests in ports, infrastructure and telecommunications across Europe and its neighbourhood; Gulf states exercise influence in the Balkans, North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean; and instability in the Red Sea affects European supply chains and energy security. At the same time, uncertainty about the United States' security commitments and greater transactionalism in Washington add another source of pressure. Security in the Baltic, Black Sea, Mediterranean and Atlantic is increasingly connected through infrastructure, economic interdependence and geopolitical competition.

Solidarity must extend across both geographical theatres and types of insecurity (Visegrad Insight 2026). Southern European cooperation can help build the political trust needed to treat these commitments as mutually reinforcing rather than competing demands. Differences in geography, size and resources make specialisation inevitable; the political challenge is to make those contributions mutually dependable rather than a source of fragmentation or dependence – or a source of bargaining.

The nESS should align greater capabilities with durable political solidarity. Southern European cooperation can contribute by making mutual support dependable across governments, national priorities and external pressures. More weapons will not necessarily produce greater strategic capacity if cooperation cannot move beyond transactionalism.

Territory, flows and societies: Southern Europe's contribution to a 360-degree security approach

Russia's war against Ukraine makes conventional deterrence an urgent European priority. A 360-degree approach does not dilute this priority or give equal weight to every threat. Rather, it helps the new European Security Strategy assess threats according to their urgency, consequences and interconnections, and match them with appropriate instruments. Southern Europe's contribution is to demonstrate how maritime disruption, neighbourhood instability and societal vulnerabilities can weaken the Union's capacity to sustain its security commitments, including on the eastern flank.

More weapons will not necessarily produce greater strategic capacity if cooperation cannot move beyond transactionalism.

The nESS should connect the geographical, functional and temporal dimensions of European security. It must link different theatres, complement deterrence with responses to hybrid, maritime and societal threats, and integrate prevention and preparedness with response and recovery. Southern Europe can support this approach by organising European security around three interdependent dimensions: territory, flows and societies. Because effective territorial defence depends on functioning networks and resilient societies (Veron 2026).

On territory, Russia's invasion shows that credible deterrence matters: resilience is no substitute for hard power. The EU can no longer ignore the need to strengthen its ability to act without the United States, while NATO may still be central to collective defence. Implementing the Strategic Compass, including its Rapid Deployment Capacity of up to 5,000 troops for crisis management, should strengthen the EU's capacity to act without conflating that role with territorial defence.

Southern European countries are particularly exposed to disruptions affecting strategic flows. They depend on maritime routes through which energy supplies travel and food, goods and commodities are transported. Submarine cables sustain communications and the digital economy, while migration and mobility require attention to human security. Defending the EU means also protecting the networks that sustain it. The nESS must keep these physical, digital, economic and human connections open, protected and resilient to coercion or disruption.

On societies, resilience complements deterrence by reducing vulnerabilities to coercion, sabotage and disinformation. For Southern Europe, this links

security planning to institutional trust, democratic resilience, climate preparedness, civil protection, and the capacity to absorb economic and demographic shocks. These are security objectives in their own right, not merely justifications for higher defence expenditure. Governments must explain how security investment protects citizens and can support employment, skills, innovation and infrastructure, without diminishing fiscal trade-offs. The aim is to connect defence capabilities and priorities with social cohesion and protection of the European social model.

Defending the EU means also protecting the networks that sustain it. The nESS must keep these physical, digital, economic and human connections open, protected and resilient to coercion or disruption.

From strategy to delivery: solidarity, governance and legitimacy

There is a difference between strategy as a document and strategising as a political process. Without sustained involvement by member states, EU institutions and relevant societal actors, the nESS risks becoming another catalogue of threats and instruments. Political ownership requires a medium-term direction that can withstand electoral pressures and changes of government while remaining adaptable to crises (Vimont 2026).

Strategising must also connect political ownership to implementation. Strategic drafting will have limited effect if priorities, procurement and financing remain disconnected; nationally driven decisions conflict with common capability and industrial objectives; or smaller coalitions fragment European efforts.

The nESS should therefore assign responsibilities, connect priorities to resources and establish review mechanisms. It should clarify what EU institutions will coordinate, what member states will provide and how progress will be assessed. Southern European governments should use this process not to present an additional list of regional demands, but to specify how their capabilities and initiatives contribute to European objectives. This requires addressing three related gaps: solidarity, governance, and legitimacy and financing.

The solidarity gap

Governments need greater certainty about the assistance they can expect and may be required to provide. The nESS should promote prior consultations, exercises and response protocols concerning Article 42(7) TEU, clarifying how assistance would be requested and coordinated and which national and European capabilities could be mobilised (Romero Junquera 2026). Southern European states can contribute operational experience in maritime security, civil protection, crisis response and critical infrastructure protection, while continuing to support deterrence and defence on the eastern flank. For instance, France has introduced nuclear "forward deterrence" which brings together several European states, including Greece, to carry out joint exercises, create greater "strategic intimacy" among them and explore how French strategic and nuclear weapons and conventional forces of other European states may complement one another. Ultimately this doctrine is aimed at strengthening Europe's potential to deter aggressions from outside.

Crises below the threshold of armed aggression, however, require different arrangements. Cyberattacks, infrastructure disruption and civil emergencies cannot automatically trigger the mutual assistance clause. The strategy should nevertheless establish predictable mechanisms for consultation, coordination and support during the opening stages of a crisis. Southern European cooperation could help test these arrangements through joint exercises connecting maritime, cyber, civil protection and hybrid scenarios. This would turn solidarity across different theatres into practical preparedness.

The governance gap

Governance cannot be reduced to a choice between unanimity and its abolition. The nESS should distinguish between decisions requiring unanimity, areas in which other procedures are available, and situations in which the principal obstacle is political rather than legal. Constructive abstention, enhanced cooperation and Article 44 TEU have different scopes and conditions and serve to move beyond the debate of unanimity vs. qualified majority voting (QMV).

In fact, embedded differentiation offers a more useful organising principle for cooperation among willing and capable states. Smaller groups should be able to develop capabilities or undertake initiatives when these respond to agreed European priorities, remain open to other member states and operate under appropriate institutional oversight. Southern European projects should demonstrate their European added value by addressing recognised capability gaps and contributing to the protection of territory, flows and societies. Regional identity alone is not sufficient justification.

The nESS should incorporate such initiatives into a common implementation framework, with defined objectives, national contributions and review procedures. This would allow Southern European cooperation to reinforce EU action without creating a separate regional agenda or duplicating existing structures.

The legitimacy and financing gap

Security policy requires sustained public support and credible financing. The nESS should require governments to explain which vulnerabilities security investment addresses, how results will be assessed and what trade-offs expenditure entails. Industrial capacity, employment, innovation and resilient infrastructure can strengthen the case for cooperation, but these benefits should not be assumed or used to dismiss competing social priorities.

Strategic ambitions must also be reflected in EU budget negotiations and national commitments. Common financing is most defensible when projects provide shared capabilities or cross-border resilience that national expenditure would not be able to deliver. Southern European governments should identify areas in which joint investment can generate European public goods, including maritime surveillance, critical infrastructure protection, military mobility, civil preparedness and secure communications.

Transparent reporting should distinguish between defence expenditure, eligible dual-use investment and wider civilian preparedness. The nESS should connect these forms of spending to measurable strategic objectives while acknowledging their different purposes. For Southern European states, this provides an opportunity to demonstrate that investment in ports, maritime infrastructure, civil protection and societal resilience is central to European defence, and supports the capacity to protect territory, sustain strategic flows and preserve social cohesion.

Ultimately, the nESS will be credible if it provides an enduring process of strategising rather than producing another strategic document simply to tick a few boxes. Southern European cooperation can contribute by making solidarity more predictable, embedding regional initiatives in EU governance, linking common objectives to capabilities and resources, and increasing Europe's capacity to act collectively across crises and geographical theatres.

The Mediterranean as a European strategic space

The Mediterranean demonstrates why territorial defence, strategic connectivity and societal resilience cannot be planned separately. Beyond its basin and shores, it links the EU with Africa, the Middle East, the Black Sea, the Red Sea and the Atlantic, and connects these regions to the Indo-Pacific through trade and supply chains. Its relevance to European security therefore extends beyond migration management, development assistance or instability on the EU's southern periphery.

The nESS should turn this recognition into agreed priorities, responsibilities and implementation mechanisms. Integrating the Mediterranean into European planning would complement attention to the eastern flank and strengthen the EU's ability to protect territory, sustain strategic flows and reinforce societal resilience.

Southern European governments should use this process not to present an additional list of regional demands, but to specify how their capabilities and initiatives contribute to European objectives.

This integration also requires stronger and more durable relations with the Southern Neighbourhood. Southern European states can help shape partnerships that move beyond short-term transactions and are assessed according to their contribution to shared security, resilience and economic development.

Maritime and infrastructure security

The Mediterranean is one of the main spaces where defence, economic resilience and strategic autonomy intersect. More than 80% of global trade by volume travels by sea, while most international data flows pass through submarine cables. Disruption around the Mediterranean, Suez or the Red Sea can rapidly affect European energy supplies, trade and digital communications. Ports, maritime routes and seabed infrastructure should consequently form an explicit part of the nESS (Lazarou et al. 2026). This agenda already has a foundation in the EU Maritime Security Strategy and its revised action plan, approved in 2023. The nESS should connect their maritime surveillance, infrastructure protection and preparedness objectives to its wider strategic priorities, rather than establish a parallel framework. Freedom of navigation is also important beyond the Mediterranean, including in East Africa, where ports, regional influence and the survival of fishing communities have wider security implications.

Southern European member states can contribute by connecting their maritime capabilities and infrastructure responsibilities to common European requirements. This provides a basis for cooperation with Baltic, Nordic and Black Sea countries, which face different strategic environments but require related capabilities: maritime surveillance, intelligence sharing, infrastructure protection, rapid attribution, and coordination among navies, coastguards and private operators. Such cooperation would help develop a European security culture in which maritime threats in one region are understood as part of a shared vulnerability rather than as geographically isolated concerns.

Climate security

The Mediterranean is a climate security hotspot, warming 20% faster than the global average. Wildfires, water stress, coastal degradation and extreme weather increasingly affect infrastructure, civil protection and governmental continuity. Climate security should therefore enter European strategic planning as a preparedness challenge, without subordinating environmental policy to military priorities.

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Southern European experience with fires, floods and emergency mobilisation can support a Mediterranean climate security initiative linking early warning, civil protection exercises, emergency logistics, and the protection of vulnerable energy and maritime infrastructure (Lazarou et al. 2026). This directly connects territory, flows and societies: climate emergencies damage physical spaces, disrupt essential networks, and test public institutions and social resilience.

The European added value of this cooperation would lie in developing cross-border preparedness practices that could also be applied to climate-related emergencies elsewhere in the EU. The nESS should incorporate climate shocks because of their economic, human and societal consequences. To make this contribution operational, Southern European governments would need to specify the capabilities they can commit, the financing required and the results against which cooperation will be assessed.

Migration, coercion and durable partnerships

The Mediterranean has often been treated primarily as a border to be controlled, making migration management the defining feature of EU relations with several neighbouring countries. This approach has fostered dependencies that governments and other actors can exploit for political leverage. It has also encouraged short-term transactions that may undermine more durable cooperation on energy, infrastructure, climate resilience and economic development.

The nESS must distinguish migration and human mobility, which require humanitarian, legal and socioeconomic responses, from the deliberate weaponisation of movement for political coercion. Protecting people and reception systems is not the same task as responding to coercive state behaviour, even when both dimensions are present in the same crisis. Preserving this distinction is important for the legitimacy of the strategy and for preventing migration from becoming the dominant lens through which the Mediterranean is viewed.

For Southern European cooperation, this distinction should guide both partnership choices and crisis responses. Partnerships should be assessed against shared long-term interests, their capacity to withstand political change and their measurable results. Reducing overdependence on migration externalisation would limit strategic vulnerability without treating migrants as a military threat.

These Mediterranean challenges highlight that strategic recognition matters only when it changes capabilities and commitments. The following initiatives set out how Southern European cooperation can make that contribution.

A set of Southern European initiatives

Southern European cooperation should translate regional geography, experience and capabilities into shared European public goods. This would demonstrate a credible commitment to European security, combining stronger contributions to military defence with preparedness for crises affecting territory, strategic flows and societies. The four initiatives below can transform the theoretical approach from Southern Europe's conception of security into operational actions: strengthening a common security culture, operationalising the 360-degree approach, addressing implementation and governance gaps, and consolidating the Mediterranean as a European strategic space. They demonstrate how a group of willing states can address shared vulnerabilities, supply capabilities and test forms of cooperation that can subsequently be extended across the EU.

Operationalising solidarity below the threshold of war

To strengthen a common European security culture, Southern European governments could propose a consultation and assistance framework for cyber incidents, infrastructure sabotage, maritime disruption and other forms of hybrid coercion. The framework should specify consultation triggers, lawful information sharing procedures, arrangements for assessing incidents, and the support available for infrastructure repair, civil protection and public communication.

Participating states should identify in advance the assistance they can provide and test requests through regular exercises. The framework would complement Article 42(7) TEU rather than automatically expand its application to crises below the threshold of armed aggression. Its purpose would be to make early consultation and assistance more predictable while preserving the various legal bases applicable to different emergencies.

Southern European experience in civil protection, maritime security and emergency response could support this initiative, but its relevance would be EU-wide. By involving partners from other regions, it would demonstrate that solidarity applies across theatres and crisis types, rather than being renegotiated whenever a new emergency arises.

A maritime and connectivity security initiative

Southern European states should develop a joint implementation programme under the EU Maritime Security Strategy and its action plan, translating the 360-degree approach into cooperation on ports, shipping routes, submarine cables, energy interconnections and other critical maritime infrastructure. Its added value would lie in agreeing on which cross-border vulnerabilities to address first, which national capabilities participants will commit and how delivery will be assessed. An initial programme should combine infrastructure mapping and shared risk assessments with exercises testing surveillance, information exchange and incident response.

National maritime authorities should designate contact points and involve navies, coastguards, civil-protection bodies and infrastructure operators according to their respective responsibilities. Cooperation with Nordic, Baltic, Atlantic and Black Sea partners should test whether these arrangements can operate across sea basins and strengthen implementation and interoperability across Europe's sea basins.

The initiative would protect more than Southern European interests. Disruption to Mediterranean ports, energy routes or digital connections can affect European supply chains, communications and military mobility, including the ability to sustain commitments on the eastern flank. Its European value would therefore lie in connecting the protection of territory with the security of the physical, digital and economic flows on which European societies depend.

Embedded differentiation

To address the implementation and governance gap, Southern European states could pilot a capability project in maritime surveillance or critical infrastructure protection with other interested member states. Participation should entail concrete financial or operational commitments, agreed milestones and transparent reporting to EU institutions and the other member states.

Southern European cooperation should translate regional geography, experience and capabilities into shared European public goods. This would demonstrate a credible commitment to European security.

Differentiation will be necessary if the EU aspires to become a more capable geopolitical actor. Not every member state needs to participate in every security project, but coalitions of willing and capable states should advance only when their initiatives pursue common European objectives, address recognised capability gaps, remain connected to EU institutions and are open to future participants.

The project would test whether embedded differentiation can convert political ambition into delivery without fragmenting the Union. Its success should be assessed by the capabilities produced and their contribution to agreed European requirements, not by the number or regional identity of the states involved.

A security investment compact

Southern European states should support a compact linking defence capability to industrial development and societal resilience. This means that certain priorities could be counted as defence spending and benefit from common European funding. Among the priorities to be funded could be securing ports and transport corridors; maritime and satellite surveillance; cybersecurity and secure communications; or making energy systems resilient.

Projects should address identified European vulnerabilities while generating wider benefits through

employment, technological innovation and resilient infrastructure. Their contribution could both strengthen public legitimacy and reduce public backlash against increasing security and defence spending, but this should not be used to avoid the debate about fiscal trade-offs or competing social priorities.

Conclusion

Security crises rarely remain confined to a single territory or policy domain. Economic shocks become political shocks. Climate emergencies affect infrastructure and social cohesion. Conflicts drive displacement, force migration and disrupt trade. The new European Security Strategy must reflect this interconnected reality. The logic of a Southern European perspective on the nESS rests on the capacity to present regional concerns as European public goods. Rather than listing its vulnerabilities and threats, Southern Europe can build on its geography, capabilities and experience to contribute to a more resilient EU that sees security and defence as an ecosystem which includes much more than only military capabilities.

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Southern Europe should not ask the EU to shift its attention from East to South. It should contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of European security, one that combines territorial defence with the protection of strategic connectivity and societal resilience. Delivering this agenda requires Europe to move from transactional security cooperation towards organised solidarity, embedded differentiation and a clearer connection between strategic ambition, capabilities and political legitimacy.

The four initiatives give this contribution practical form: earlier consultation and assistance would make solidarity more dependable; maritime cooperation would protect strategic connectivity; a shared capability pilot would test delivery through embedded differentiation; and an investment compact would connect security objectives to financing and public legitimacy.

If Southern Europe can structure this position collectively and translate it into shared capabilities and reliable commitments, it will do more than add a regional perspective to the debate. Its contribution will be a European strategy whose balance, comprehensiveness and legitimacy are demonstrated by its effectiveness: protecting territory, safeguarding essential connections and enabling societies to withstand disruption.

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