

**EUROPE,
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EUROPE'S STRATEGIC AUTONOMY: THAT OBSCURE OBJECT OF DESIRE

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Over a summer of 2021, full of strategic twists and turns, we have witnessed the departure, without consultations, nor with triumph, of the last Atlantic Alliance forces still present in Afghanistan. We have also seen the constitution, on the very day of the publication of the EU’s “Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific”, of a tripartite alliance between the United States, Australia, and Britain with no communication whatsoever with the European Union. Then came the eruption of a diplomatic crisis of a magnitude unseen since 2003 between Paris and Washington, triggered by the breach of the contract for the provision of attack submarines from France to Australia. Coming in quick succession, these three events have given a new lease of life to the debate on Europe’s “strategic autonomy”, which seemed to have run out of steam.

However, will this triple warning be enough for EU leaders to move from words to deeds? From Srebrenica to Donald Trump’s provocative statements, through the annexation of Crimea and Brexit, this is not the first nor the most crucial moment that Europe is faced with the challenge of establishing “an appropriate level” of strategic autonomy. How many times have EU Member States promised to do so?

A difficulty is that the relationship that EU leaders have with the concept of strategic autonomy is as ambiguous as the relationship between the two main characters of that 1977 Luis Buñuel movie, “That Obscure Object of Desire”. In the movie, Mathieu, a middle-age French man steeped in tradition tries to seduce Conchita, a flamenco dancer with such an enigmatic personality that the Spanish master had to use two different actresses to cover her role. In other words, instead of rattling wooden sabres, unleashing the chatterboxes and releasing grand sounding – and confusing – statements, it is necessary to agree on the concepts.

When we speak about “strategic autonomy”, what do we actually mean? Is this about the capacity of European countries to manage crises in their immediate neighbourhood in the way France and the UK envisaged it in 1998 in the aftermath of the Yugoslav wars, *i.e.*, a form of autonomy that is not only acceptable but very much supported by Washington? Is this the somewhat elusive extended form of autonomy pictured in the 2016 EU Global Strategy, *i.e.*, a form of autonomy bordering on military independence, a prospect which so much terrified Eastern Europe as well as a few others? Is this the elusive “comprehensive autonomy”, a concept which succeeded that of extended autonomy and means nothing else than autonomy writ large, or in one word: independence? Why is the prospect of strategic autonomy so appealing, to the point of becoming such an (obscure) object of desire? Now that strategic autonomy has been on the political agenda for so long, how can it become reality?

STRATEGIC AUTONOMY'S THREE FACES

Strategic autonomy act 1: international crisis management

The original definition of Europe's strategic autonomy should be sought in the Franco-British declaration of St-Malo of 4 December 1998. It was both brief and clear:

For it to “play its full role on the international stage” [...] “the Union must have the capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces, the means to decide to use them, and a readiness to do so, in order to respond to international crises”¹.

Six months later, at the Cologne European summit (3-4 June 1999), all of those countries that belonged to the EU at the time made this aspiration their own:

In order for [the Council [...] to have the ability to take decisions on the full range of conflict prevention and crisis management tasks defined in the Treaty on European Union], [...] “the Union must have the capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces, the means to decide to use them, and a readiness to do so, in order to respond to international crises without prejudice to actions by NATO”².

Not without some meandering, the strategic autonomy discussion led to the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty (2007), more specifically in article 42.1 of the Treaty of European:

“The common security and defence policy shall be an integral part of the common foreign and security policy. It shall provide the Union with an operational capacity drawing on civilian and military assets. The Union may use them on missions outside the Union for peacekeeping, conflict prevention and strengthening international security in accordance with the principles of the United Nations Charter. The performance of these tasks shall be undertaken using capabilities provided by the Member States”.

The concept of “strategic autonomy” itself does not appear in the Treaty. However, it is obvious that it lies behind the description of the CSDP and is embedded in the very objectives pursued by the Member States. Concretely, and as specified at the Helsinki summit in December 1999 and reiterated in 2003, this meant building the capacity to project forces jointly – at a level then estimated to that of an army corps (60 000 men) –, in order to manage crises affecting the direct neighbourhood of the Union, when the United States do not wish to intervene. To be acceptable to Member States, CSDP must rest on intergovernmental cooperation – not Community action – and defence “policy” must remain subordinate to “foreign policy”. In addition, three criteria embedded in the TEU – crisis management, outside the territory of the EU, without US participation – were meant in theory to allow for a clear and acceptable articulation of European efforts with those of NATO, which focusses on the territorial defence of its own members in case of aggression, with the support of US and Canadian forces.

1. “Joint Declaration on European Defence - Joint Declaration issued at the British-French Summit (Saint-Malo, 4 December 1998)”. Link: https://www.cvce.eu/obj/franco_british_st_malo_declaration_4_december_1998-en-f3cd16fb-fc37-4d52-936f-c8e9bc80f24f.html

2. “Cologne European Council 3 – 4 June 1999 Conclusions of the Presidency” - “Annex III Declaration on strengthening the Common European Policy on Security and Defence point 1”, *European Parliament*, 3-4 June 1999. Link : https://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/kol1_en.htm

In sum, this initial form of strategic autonomy is synonymous with CSDP and entails a bounded form of military independence, which applies only to the management of international crises through the despatch of an expeditionary force.

Strategic autonomy act 2: military independence

Strategic autonomy in its second understanding was borne from the pen of the European Commission in its communication “Towards a more competitive and efficient defence and security sector”, issued in 2013. The communication reads:

“Europe must be able to assume its responsibilities for its own security and for international peace and stability in general. This necessitates a certain degree of strategic autonomy: to be a credible and reliable partner, Europe must be able to decide and to act without depending on the capabilities of third parties”³.

Later in the year, in the conclusions of its 19-20 December summit, the European Council stated:

“Europe needs a more integrated, sustainable, innovative and competitive defence technological and industrial base (EDTIB) to develop and sustain defence capabilities. This can also enhance its strategic autonomy and its ability to act with partners”⁴.

Three years later, in 2016, the concept found its decisive anchoring in the EU Global Strategy:

“The Strategy nurtures the ambition of strategic autonomy for the European Union. This is necessary to promote the common interests of our citizens, as well as our principles and values. (...) An appropriate level of ambition and strategic autonomy is important for Europe’s ability to promote peace and security within and beyond its borders. We will therefore enhance our efforts on defence, cyber, counterterrorism, energy and strategic communications. (...) A sustainable, innovative and competitive European defence industry is essential for Europe’s strategic autonomy and for a credible CSDP”⁵.

As it endorsed the Strategy’s implementation plan in November 2016, the European Council stated:

“The Council is committed to strengthening the Union’s ability to act as a security provider and to enhance the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) as an essential part of the Union’s external action. This will enhance its global strategic role and its capacity to act autonomously when and where necessary and with partners wherever possible”⁶.

3. “Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions”, *European Commission*, 24 July 2013, p.3. Link : <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52013DC0542&from=EN>

4. “Note of transmission from the General Secretariat of the Council to delegations”, 20 December 2013, p.8. Link : Site : https://www.senat.fr/fileadmin/Fichiers/Images/commission/affaires_europeennes/Conclusions_CE/bruxelles_dec2013.pdf

5. “Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe - A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy”, 28 June 2016. Link: https://eeas.europa.eu/topics/eu-global-strategy/17304/node/17304_fr

6. “Council conclusions on implementing the EU Global Strategy in the area of Security and Defence - Council conclusions”, *Council of the European Union*, p.2. Link: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14149-2016-INIT/en/pdf>

Finally, it is important to recall article 3 of the European Defence Fund regulation (June 2021), which conferred legal value to the concept, thereby opening the door for the European Court of Justice to shape it further:

“The general objective of the Fund is to foster the competitiveness, efficiency and innovation capacity of the European defence technological and industrial base (EDTIB) throughout the Union, which contributes to the Union strategic autonomy and its freedom of action (...)”⁷.

Unfortunately, what the strategic autonomy concept has gained in acceptance, it has lost in precision.

First of all, the concept is no longer only about projecting power beyond the borders of the Union, but about Europe assuming responsibility “for its own security” both “within and beyond its borders”, including in the fields of counterterrorism and the protection against threats in the cyberspace. The ambition is therefore for Europe to acquire a “global strategic role” that entails the “capacity to act autonomously when and where necessary and with partners wherever possible”.

Second, the division of labour with NATO becomes less precise, unless strategic autonomy is interpreted as the creation of the much-touted “European pillar of NATO”.

Finally, the focus is placed on the industrial dimension of strategic autonomy. This is not surprising since this is the only area in which the Union has legal capacity.

Let us remember that this second version of the strategic autonomy pursued the aim of endowing Europe with an “appropriate level” of military independence in external crisis management as well as for the protection of Europe’s own citizens. These aims are reflected in the level of ambition of the Global Strategy’s implementation plan and its three objectives, “responding to external conflicts and crises”, “building the capacity of partners”, and “protecting the Union and its citizens”⁸.

Because it involves defending the Union within its own borders, this vision of the strategic autonomy has faced strong resistance from the Central European countries, with Poland first in line, but also from the Baltic states and their Nordic neighbours. For all of those countries, who share a justified concern about Russia’s aggressive intents, the plan will lead to the “decoupling” of European defence from NATO, and possibly trigger a withdrawal of US forces from European soil.

Strategic autonomy act 3: autonomy writ large

So as to narrow down the scope of possible interpretations among Member States, Commission leader in Brussels have fostered the emergence of a broader concept of strategic autonomy, building on existing doctrines. Thus, the EU High Representative for the CSFP, Josep Borrell, stated in December 2020:

7. “Regulation (EU) 2021/697 du 29 April 2021 establishing the European Defence Fund and repealing Regulation (EU) 2018/1092”, *Official Journal of the European Union*, 29 April 2021. Link: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021R0697&qid=1631263086142&from=EN>

8. “Council conclusions on implementing the EU Global Strategy in the area of Security and Defence 14 November 2016 14149/16”, *Council of the European Union*, 14 November 2016. Link: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14149-2016-INIT/en/pdf>

“If I have approached the issue of strategic autonomy at some length under the political-military prism, it is because this is, as I recognised from the beginning, the most sensitive dimension of the problem. However, it is not the only one because the stakes of strategic autonomy are not limited to security and defence. They apply to a wide range of issues including trade, finance and investments. Whereas in trade, the EU is already strategically autonomous, when it comes to finance and investment work remains to be done”⁹.

This approach, however, has elicited concerns among the most liberal Europeans who read it as a signal that Europe may want to embark on a path of industrial and commercial self-sufficiency, *i.e.*, veer towards protectionism.

Still, there was more to the debate. The years 2018-2019 saw the emergence of the somewhat intriguing concept of “open strategic autonomy”, which gradually found its way in official statements. Thus, in May 2021, European Commissioner Margrethe Vestager stated:

The point is that we need to strike a careful balance. A balance between strengthening our own capacity in strategic areas and ensuring that the EU reinforces its position in global value chains by diversifying external trade and co-operating with our international partners. This is what open strategic autonomy is about”¹⁰.

As it appears, this concept now seems to have rallied the support of EU leaders in Brussels. Thus, the Strategic Foresight Report “The EU’s capacity and freedom to act”, issued by the European Commission on 8 September 2021, sets out “10 key areas of action where the EU can seize opportunities for its global leadership and open strategic autonomy”. Among those, one only is related to defence, with the aim of “strengthening security and defence capacities and access to space”. More precision is not forthcoming.

In a world in which states are interdependent, defining one’s own “key areas of action” *i.e.*, in which domains the EU wants to be independent, and by deduction where it accepts some degree of dependence, implies an admission that EU member states can choose their interdependencies to manage them better. This is nothing really new.

At the same time, it is worth noting that the notion of “strategic autonomy” increasingly tends to give way in the political discourse to that of “European sovereignty” or even the “capacity and freedom to act” to avoid alarming anyone. Tellingly, Commission President von der Leyen did not use it in her state of the Union speech on 16 September 2021.

THE RISKS OF SEMANTIC MEANDERING

Lest the concept of “strategic autonomy” becomes insignificant, we should make the effort to specify which type of autonomy we mean when we employ it. This is cumbersome, but unavoidable, in order not to confuse one’s audience, but at times also not to confuse oneself. The sparring match between French President Emmanuel Macron and German Minister of Defence

9. Josep Borell, “Why European strategic autonomy matters”, *blog by HR/VP Josep Borrell, EEAS*, 3 December 2020.

Link: https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/90963/node/90963_en

10. “Statement by Executive Vice-President Margrethe Vestager on the Commission’s proposal for a new Regulation to address distortions caused by foreign subsidies in the Single Market”, 5 May 2021. Link: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_21_2286

Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer (AKK) towards the end of 2020 is an excellent example of such confusion. Let us remember the flow of their “conversation”.

On 2 November 2020, AKK stated in an interview with the Politico magazine:

“Both America and Europe need to fully accept the realities of continued U.S. nuclear deterrence on the European continent. Illusions of European strategic autonomy must come to an end: Europeans will not be able to replace America’s crucial role as a security provider”¹¹.

Here, she clearly meant strategic autonomy in its second definition, corresponding to military independence.

In an interview a few days later, the French president came back at length to the concept of strategic autonomy. In response to the interviewer who was asking him to define it, he spoke of the European currency, technology, the extraterritoriality of the dollar, and ended up concluding:

“Hence, when I talk about sovereignty or strategic autonomy, I am bringing together all these issues, which at first glance seem very different. How do we decide for ourselves? That is precisely what autonomy is: the idea that we choose our own rules for ourselves”¹².

Obviously, his understanding was that of strategic autonomy in the third, and broadest interpretation. When asked about the statement of AKK, he qualified it of a “historical misinterpretation”.

A few days later, the German minister would clarify her comments in a speech at the Armed Forces University in Hamburg:

“The idea of strategic autonomy for Europe goes too far if it is taken to mean that we could guarantee security, stability and prosperity in Europe without NATO and without the US. That is an illusion”.

“But if we take it to refer to our capacity to act independently as Europeans where our common interests are concerned, then yes, that is our common goal and reflects our common understanding of sovereignty and ability to act”¹³.

In other words, what AKK said was “yes” to crisis management (strategic autonomy act 1), but “no” to military independence (strategic autonomy act 2).

The most striking aspect of this exchange is that, throughout, the French President and the German Minister never talked about the same thing, demonstrating how both pointless and risky the inflation of the concept can be. Pointless since other words exist to describe our object: crisis management, military independence, independence... Risky since, by extending the concept to just about any policy domain, one loses sight of defence. Ensuring Europe’s security of supplies, the strength of the Euro, of the European industry, trade, technology and research, all of this is of

11. Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, “Europe still needs America”, *Politico*, 2 November 2020. Link: <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-still-needs-america/>

12. “The Macron doctrine: a conversation with the French President”, *Le Grand Continent*, 16 November 2020. Link: <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2020/11/16/macron/>

13. “Second Keynote Speech by German Federal Minister of Defence at the Helmut Schmidt University in Hamburg”, *Federal Ministry of Defense*, 19 November 2020. Link: <https://www.bmvg.de/en/news/second-keynote-speech-german-minister-of-defence-akk-4503976>

course vital. However, this does not discharge the Union from the requirement to manage international crises on its borders or to defend its territory, on its own if needed, with others if possible. If what leaders have in mind is the broad understanding of strategic autonomy, then they should use the words “independence” or simply “autonomy” in its etymological sense, *i.e.*, one’s ability to live according to one’s own laws. In law as in grammar, the presence of adjectives restrains the meaning of words, whereas their absence broadens it.

May the reader forgive this long and painstaking clarification. However, if EU leaders cannot first agree on what they want to do, they will never get anywhere. This is the challenge of the “strategic compass” in preparation and to be issued in March 2022¹⁴. The worst would be if they repeated the “constructive ambiguity” that destroyed a huge share of the pro-European spirit by thickening the semantic fog.

WHY DOES EUROPEAN STRATEGIC AUTONOMY MATTER?

Such was the question asked by Josep Borrell at the end of 2020¹⁵. The question deserves thorough discussion, with due differentiation among the types of autonomy we are talking about – which all can have their merit.

Strategic autonomy as protection against the ripple effects of neighbourhood crises

There are two good reasons why Europe should endow itself with the capacity to manage international crises of the type experienced in Yugoslavia, Kosovo, Mali or Syria.

The first is that European countries are the first impacted by the ripple effects of crises erupting in their neighbourhood. It is their responsibility, not that of the United States, to prevent or respond to them. For example, if Europe had been able to impose a peaceful solution to the parties in conflict in Syria at the beginning of 2011, Member States would probably have been able to spare themselves the rifts that opened in their handling of the consequences of the migration crisis in 2015. “Peacekeeping” is enshrined in article 42 of the Treaty on European Union and therefore part and parcel of crisis management operations that are the very purpose of CSDP. EU Member States cannot keep waiting for the United States to step in every time a crisis breaks up in their surroundings. The way they have managed their engagement in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan demonstrates that Washington is less and less likely to reiterate expeditions of this kind.

The second reason is that the Union must be true to its values, which are the foundation of European action, according to Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union. Europe, therefore, cannot limit itself to verbal condemnations or commercial sanctions. When needed, it must be able to stop a genocide in Srebrenica, “two hours” flight away from Paris or respond to the massacre

14. See, among an abundance of sources, “*EU’s Strategic Compass for Security and Defence: A new approach in 2021*”-FINABEL European Army Interoperability Centre Mihaela Ungureanu 1 June 2021”, *Finabel*, 1 June 2021. Link: <https://finabel.org/eus-strategic-compass-for-security-and-defence-a-new-approach-in-2021/>

15. Josep Borrell, “Why European strategic autonomy matters?”, *blog by HR/VP Josep Borrell*, 3 December 2020. Link: https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/89865/why-european-strategic-autonomy-matters_en

of innocents through the use of chemical weapons in a suburb of Damascus. Condemnation is one step, but if Europe continues to be unable to align its actions on its words, it will continue to suffer a credibility gap on the international stage.

Strategic autonomy as self-defence if needed

Until recently, asking whether the EU should develop the capacity to ensure the collective defence of its territory raised alarm bells in many quarters, for the reason that many Europeans believe that such defence is beyond their means or, to quote again AKK, “an illusion”.

The truth of this statement is questionable. If one takes into consideration the fact that EU Member States’ yearly defence budgets combined amount to three times Russia’s defence budget, then, the problem is not in the volume of expenditure but rather, in their structure, and there are solutions to this.

In reality, the question is not whether collective European defence is possible, but whether EU Member States want it. If they are reluctant, it is because this would amount to questioning the solidity of the security guarantee provided by the United States through article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, and therefore question the reliability of Europe’s greatest ally. However, is it being anti-American to question oneself on the value of an agreement made more than seventy years ago, in a totally different context? *Realpolitik*, a concept born in Germany¹⁶, mandates that we look at the world as it is, not as we would like it to be. In this context, stating that, in the case of aggression on European territory, Washington would calibrate its response first and foremost based on the assessment of its own interests should not be taken as an offence. France, Britain, or Germany would behave no differently if they were in a similar position. Besides, as historical experience demonstrates, weighing those interests can take some time – remember 1914-1917, 1939-1941... – and can at times lead to default on commitments.

The reality is that states are “cold monsters”, as Nietzsche said, and that they “coldly lie” when it suits them. This should be no surprise. States act according to their interests, which can lead them to flout the values they proclaim, the treaties they have ratified, and even the contracts they have signed. It would be a mistake to believe that they are committed to everything they say, sign or write. Only their deeds count, not their words.

As the Afghans are painfully learning, and the Kurds have learned before them, it is always very risky to rest on a third party to ensure one’s own defence. EU Member States would be well inspired to meditate on the experience of these two people and understand that it is in their interest to build up its capacity to defend themselves, should the US decide not to honour their signature in a particular and not-so-implausible situation.

Strategic autonomy as a means to act as a global actor

If there is a single lesson to draw from the recent decision of Australia to purchase nuclear submarines from the US and Britain – rather than from France –, it is that the protector’s guarantee goes together with the alignment of the one under its protection. In fact, Australia’s

16. The concept was first theorised by August Ludwig von Rochau, a German journalist and politician, in a book published in 1853. See : Dunkan J. Kelly, “August Ludwig von Rochau and *Realpolitik* as Historical Political Theory”, *Global Intellectual History*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2018, p.301-330.

priority was not to acquire submarines, but to secure protection against China, which Canberra assessed only come from Washington. How much this would cost was a secondary consideration.

With this decision, Canberra is following the traditional British path – to which, incidentally, Britain is showing increasing commitment. As Chatham House Professor Kerry Brown notices:

“For the UK, this pact tries to make a reality of post-EU life and having a meaningful security role. This has irritated fellow Europeans such as the French because of their separate deals with Australia and shows the price London is willing to pay for this. It underlines the reality that – after taking control – the UK’s foreign and security policy is now decided in Washington”¹⁷.

If Europe does not want to have to yield to the policy whims of its American protector – such as, for example, Washington’s withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal or its decision to move its embassy to Jerusalem – ; if it wants to be able to “take its destiny in its own hands”; avoid being hostage of events and decisions that are taken elsewhere; avoid seeing its leaders spied on, its elections influenced, its companies sanctioned, its patents stolen and its researchers leave, then it must learn to manage all of the levers of powers, including the military one.

For, if Europe is unable to protect itself, it will have to align on the decisions of its protector. However, no protection comes for free, at least not indefinitely. Sooner or later, there is a price to pay. This price can be military, financial, commercial or diplomatic, or all of those. This is what happened in Iraq, in Afghanistan, and what would happen if the Europeans were to let themselves drawn into a war with China, which would not be their war.

The question Europe needs to answer is therefore both simple and vital: can the Union continue being an economic and trade power if it is incapable of taking care of its protection and that of its allies? Or, to state it differently: what is the value of the Union if it is unable to defend its own citizens? Far from being a French obsession, the strategic autonomy imperative has been increasing with the growth of Europe’s economic weight, magnifying every day more the imbalance between Europe’s power components.

Then, which one among the three forms of autonomy should the Europeans leaders chose? Whichever it is, they will have to explain it clearly and account for their choice to their voters.

ACHIEVING STRATEGIC AUTONOMY: HOW?

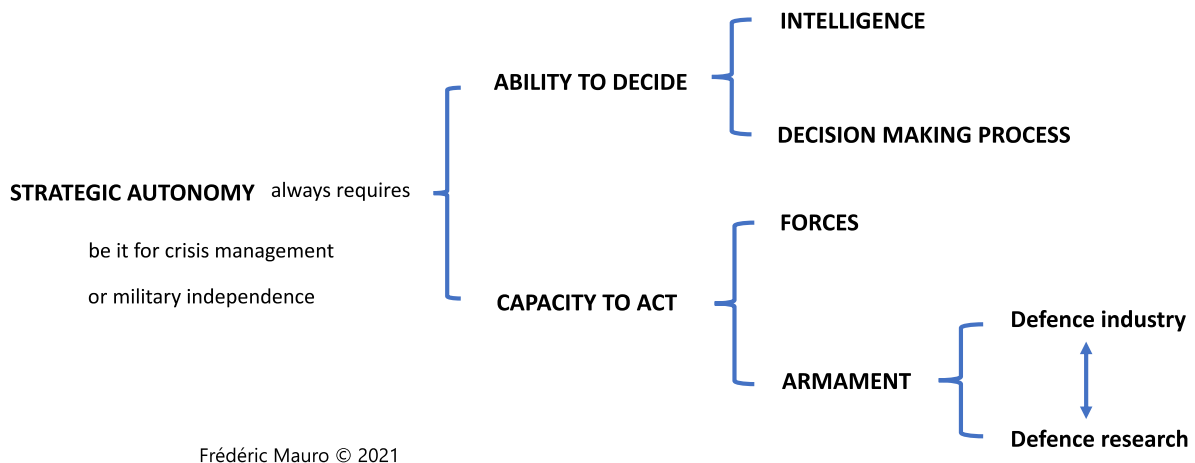
The three building blocks of strategic autonomy

Following its emergence in the political debate, the concept of strategic autonomy has been dissected by a wide range of doctrinal publications. A consensus now seems to have been reached

17. Dr Beyza Unal, “Is the AUKUS alliance meaningful or merely provocation”, *Chatham House*, 16 September 2021.
Link: https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/09/aucus-alliance-meaningful-or-merely-provocation?utm_source=Chatham%20House&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=12663392_MEM%20-%20New%20Members%20Multimedia%20%20-%202017.09.21&utm_content=Image&dm_i=1S3M,7JF4W,NUST28,UODWA,1

on its main constitutive elements. In a recent study,¹⁸ we highlighted its two most important and constant components, which are, in our analysis, the ability to decide and the capacity to act – at least with regards to the first two meanings of strategic autonomy. Each of those two elements itself includes sub-components, as shown in the graph below.

The constant components of ‘strategic autonomy’



Still, this illustration falls short of explaining fully what strategic autonomy is about and, importantly, what it is not, *i.e.*, the random aggregation of an element of power with no regard for their coherence. Going back to the root of the concept, *i.e.*, the St Malo declaration,¹⁹ it seems more accurate to present strategic autonomy in the form of an equation to capture the essence of the concept:

STRATEGIC AUTONOMY = POLITICAL WILL × ABILITY TO DECIDE × CAPACITY TO ACT

As the formula indicates, strategic autonomy results from a multiplication, not from an addition of composite elements. If one of the elements is equal to zero or close to that, the total will also be equal to zero or almost. Thus, even assuming Europe had reached the Helsinki headline goal set in 2003 of putting together a 60 000 soldiers’ strong capacity in 2010, with no will to use it, and no ability to decide its use, the effort would have been worthless.

Besides, all three elements must be present at the same time. Putting them in place successively is not good enough. In other words, a step-by-step approach will not work. The creation of the

18. Frédéric Mauro, Edouard Simon, Ana-Isabel Xavier, “Study for the European Parliament, Sub-committee on Defence and Security, Review of the Preparatory Action on Defence Research (PADR) and European Defence Industrial Development Programme (EDIDP): lessons for the implementation of the European Defence Fund (EDF)”, *European Parliament*, 26 May 2021, p.41 ff.

Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653638/EXPO_STU\(2021\)653638_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653638/EXPO_STU(2021)653638_EN.pdf)

19. In the St Malo declaration: the “readiness” to use the capacity; the “means to decide” to use the capacity, and the “capacity for autonomous action” itself.

capacity will not generate the will to use it, nor can long term planning be designed without an agreement on what the capacity is meant for.

The main reason for Europe's failure to achieve strategic autonomy over the past twenty years is that successive European governments, even assuming they intended to, have never resolved the issue of the capacity to decide, focussing instead on the capacity to act, whether in its operational dimension *i.e.*, military forces, its capability dimension *i.e.*, common enablers, its industrial dimension *i.e.*, merging companies or, more recently, its defence research dimension through the European Defence Fund. From this perspective, the idea of an "initial entry force" that could be deployed as "first responder" in an urgent crisis – an idea put on the table by the French and German Defence Ministers in May, but which gained momentum after the chaotic evacuation of Kabul²⁰ – is nothing but one more misguided attempt to focus on the means rather than the ends and the ways to achieve them. Without genuine political will and the capacity to decide on its employment, it is bound to fail.

Moving from words to deeds

Considering the terms of the equation, the first condition that needs to be met for Europe to become strategically autonomous is the presence of a group of states that share a determination to do so. For this, the framework of the European treaties must be put aside in a first stage for the reason that a number of Member States have not intention to challenge the current *status quo*. They have good reasons for this. It is important to understand them, accept them and respect them.

First, there are the neutral states, such as Austria and Ireland, which do not belong to NATO and have no intent either to participate in a common European defence.

Second, there are those EU Member States, whose military capacity and defence industry are so closely linked to those of the United States that their leaders feel a common defence would do a disservice to their interests rather than support them. This is for instance the case of Sweden, due to the linkages of its defence industry to that of the United States, or of Denmark, which does not take part in the CSDP and whose forces are deeply implicated in NATO. In addition to this, the only significant military initiative involving the Northern European and Baltic states is the *Joint Expeditionary Force*, a formation led by the UK,²¹ which operates within the NATO framework.

Finally, there are those EU Member States that feel so threatened by Russia that they will never risk jeopardising US protection for the benefit of a hypothetical future European defence. Those Member States will not make any commitment to European defence until they see a credible European alternative to US protection emerging. Until this happens, they will keep preferring the stamping of NATO combat boots to the chatters of the EU institutions, and they cannot be blamed for this.

Therefore, those EU Member States that are truly committed must be brought together. Who are they?

20. "EU says Afghanistan shows need for rapid-reaction force", *Reuters*, 30 August 2021.

Link: <https://www.reuters.com/world/eu-says-afghanistan-shows-need-rapid-reaction-force-2021-08-30/>

21. The Force involves nine EU member states in addition to the UK: Denmark, Finland, Estonia, Island, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, and Norway.

Until now, France has focussed its efforts almost exclusively on Germany – with little success. German leaders, in their majority, are willing to build up the defence industry, as long as it serves their national economic interest, which is also the case of a number of French political leaders. However, building an airplane together does not amount standing shoulder to shoulder on the battlefield. Neither the Transall nor the A400M have led to the integration of European military forces, no more than the Eurofighter itself, despite being the most ambitious European armament programme ever undertaken. The main obstacle is that German leaders are not ready to build a common defence, in a country where the word “defence” is still looked upon with suspicion.

To understand Germany’s limitations, it is important to take into account three factors. The first is the country’s constitution – diligently protected by the Karlsruhe Constitutional Court –, which constitutes an almost insuperable obstacle to Germany’s participation in a common defence²². The second is Germany’s political system, which rests on the formation of coalition governments that are the outcome of compromises among political parties. Once the coalition agreement has been reached, their hands are tied in discussions with European partners. Last but not least is the nuclear taboo, which makes any strategic dialogue on nuclear deterrence impossible between Berlin and Paris – even if the Germans prefer to ignore the fact that American protection of their territory rests on the presence of free fall bombs inherited from the Cold War and certainly do not wish to query Washington’s determination to save Berlin by destroying Moscow with intercontinental ballistic missiles. The only way to overcome this obstacle would be to insert the common defence in the institutional framework of the Union, but since such a move would have to be decided unanimously by the Council, this has no chance of coming into being. It is therefore easier for German politicians to settle for an unsatisfactory *status quo* than to spend a lot of energy on an issue that does not seem to be of great concern to German citizens.

By contrast, Italy, which was for long France’s main defence industrial partner (the two countries led joint satellite, missile, frigate and other projects), ahead of Germany and the UK, and whose defence industrial base, surprisingly, is stronger than Germany’s, has been unfairly neglected by Paris. Unfortunately, the recent attempt to merge the French and Italian naval industries has failed. In the aeronautics sector, France’s obsession to build a closed partnership with Germany around a few participants only has led to the siding of the Italian industry, which then easily found an abode in the British industry. Should the Italian capacity end up in the hands of American industrial interests, this would not be surprising, given the number of precedents. True, France’s relations with the successive Italian governments since the end of the Berlusconi era have been chaotic, to say the least, and have left scars on both sides of the Alps, not only in the defence industrial domain. However, today, Paris should use the presence of the Draghi government as an opportunity to reach out and tie a solid and lasting partnership that would bring Italy back to the heart of Europe.

Looking beyond Italy, Spain and Greece have shown genuine interest in European defence. It is towards those countries, rather than Germany, whose “yes” to European defence may never come, that Paris should look. As for the Benelux countries, they might let themselves be convinced under the condition that they obtain serious guarantees that decisions will be taken in common and that

22. See among many writing on the topic: Paul Taylor, Friends of Europe “Jumping over its own shadow: Germany and the Future of European Defence” *Friends of Europe*, 11 October 2017.

Link: <https://www.friendsofeurope.org/insights/jumping-over-its-shadow-germany-and-the-future-of-european-defence/>

they will not have to bow to the law of the biggest. In other words, this should be genuine integration.

Further, this integration should remain open to all of those who wish to join at some point. For example, some of the Nordic countries, such as Estonia or Finland, as well as some Central European countries, such as the Czech Republic, have clearly shown appetite for more European defence. However, even if no EU Member State should be excluded as a matter of principle, some must lead the way. What is important to avoid is a repeat of the mistakes made via the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), a framework that has proven to be too inclusive at the expense of integration.

Going back to the second variable of the strategic autonomy equation, moving from words to deeds means resolving the issue of the ability to decide, in particular voting on a common budget and deciding the use of force. Waging war is indeed not the same as negotiating a treaty. In this domain, the main flaw of the current European defence and security architecture is that it places defence in the hands of diplomats, whereas, when it comes to the use of force, the strength and the reactivity of the politico-military chain of command are decisive factors since every hour, and sometimes every minute, counts.

The main issue is therefore not about building a “general European HQ” – although this is needed – but to know who the political leaders are who will direct the generals. Thinking that the response to an imminent threat could come from the European Council, who decides by unanimity, would doom European defence for ever, especially as a number of the members of that Council are particularly sensitive to external influences.

The reason why countries such as Russia and Turkey possess a strategic nimbleness that enables them to play such a role on the international stage, despite being much lesser powers than the Union economically, is because, for them, the issue of the chain of command does not arise.

Of course, the point is not that Europe should imitate those countries in their autocratic forms of governance. In democracies, the choice of a leadership able to take decisions on defence must obey two conditions: this leadership must be elected, and it must be accountable to its constituents. However, in the absence of a federal state, we need to imagine a decision-making structure within a new defence and security architecture that would be both efficient and legitimate.

A possible solution was put forward at the Meseberg summit in 2018, where France and Germany proposed the establishment of a European Security Council deciding by qualified majority. This idea should be taken forward with those Member States that are willing to participate. This certainly would not include the UK – and perhaps even not Germany, or at least not only Germany, or not yet Germany, for the reasons exposed earlier.

Besides, another name should probably be chosen for this body, given the linguistic proximity with “UN Security Council”, which may mislead some into thinking that members would possess a right of veto. Should this happen, this would directly contradict the objective of efficiency pursued. One may suggest instead to call the decision-making body “European Defence Council”. This Council would be part and parcel of an authentic “European Defence Union” – to use a concept that is not new, but was placed again squarely on the agenda by Commission President von der

Leyen in her State of the Union speech in 2021²³. In this set-up, the ministers of defence, underneath the highest decision-making body, composed by the heads of states and governments of participating countries, would meet separately from the foreign ministers. Nonessential decisions would be prepared by the Chiefs of Staff of the participating countries based on qualified majority voting. This would cover 90% of the issues on the agenda of the European Defence Council. Only the most important decisions, *i.e.*, the use of force and the vote of the budget, would have to be proposed by the Council and endorsed, like in all democracies, by a parliamentary assembly. The latter could be composed of the aggregation of the national Members of Parliament and members of the European Parliament of the participating countries.

Finally, among the three components, the “capacity to act” is probably the easiest to put in place – assuming participating nations know what they want to achieve. But what is the point of working on defence planning if there is no preliminary agreement on what kind of military tool one wants to build? From this perspective, more than a “strategic compass” to identify the North and find its position on the world’s geopolitical map, what Europe needs is a roadmap to identify what kind of route it will take, going through which ports, with what kind of crew and vessel. Let us hope the “Strategic Compass” exercise will help to deliver precisely such a roadmap in March 2022.

What is important with regards to the capacity, as already alluded to, is that there will be no real common defence without military integration. Simply adding national forces will not be enough. The day when the leaders of the European Defence Union decide to resort to force, the certainty that the troops under their command will deploy must be there. This certainty would not exist for troops placed under the command of the Member States, as some of them may not be in agreement with the decision. It could be there with an integrated force. This is why ideas such as that of a “twenty-eight army”, put forward by experts from the German Social Democratic Party, or of a “European legion”, voiced by former Polish Defence Minister Radosław Sikorski, are worth exploring further.

CONCLUSION: NO MORE TALKING! ACTION NEEDED!

With regards to the discourse, it seems essential to rediscover the central meaning of words as well as the value of brevity. Israel’s “Grand Strategy”, formulated by Ben Gourion in the middle of the 20th century, was expressed in a few sentences that were easy for all to grasp: “Israel must never be surprised. For this we must attain air superiority and access the best intelligence possible”. So did Tel Aviv act, and the strategy remains current. May the drafters of the Strategic Compass reach the same degree of clarity and brevity in their laudable effort to articulate the EU’s political will!

Words, however, are not sufficient. For too long, the EU has satisfied itself with a diplomacy of words, often moralistic and idealistic, but powerless in front of chaos and atrocities, as we saw in Yugoslavia and in many subsequent instances, with consequences, which Europe is the first to suffer from. The reason is that Member States, rather than integrating defence into a democratic construction where they would have a say, prefer to accept the humiliation and subservience that

23. “State of the Union 2021”, *European Commission*, 15 September 2021.

Link: https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/strategic-planning/state-union-addresses/state-union-2021_en

are the price to pay for American protection. Doing so, not only do the Union and its Member States earn the contempt of other powers, but they also lose the respect of their own citizens.

The citizens of Europe are tired of the strategic babble of their leaders and the alphabet soup of acronyms they have been throwing around over the years under the pretence of building a “Europe of Defence”. They should stop talking and start acting. If they truly mean it, they should lose no time in creating the much-touted “European Defence Union”, another word for the “common defence” heralded in 1992 in the Maastricht treaty, for which Europe has been waiting for too long. Only then will they finally conquer the strategic autonomy they confusedly aspire to. ■

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ANALYSIS #13

EUROPE'S STRATEGIC AUTONOMY: THAT OBSCURE OBJECT OF DESIRE

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