The European Security and Defence Union

The geopolitical rivalry of great powers
Does Europe have a say?

Russia is not a partner, but a political opponent the west needs to reckon with

Dr Sabine Fischer,
Senior Research Fellow, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Berlin

Preparing for Taiwan contingencies

Prof Hideshi Tokuchi,
President, Research Institute for Peace and Security, Tokyo

Where is the European defence heading?

From strategic autonomy to strategic sovereignty

by Frédéric Mauro, lawyer at the Brussels' bar and associate researcher at the French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs (IRIS), Brussels/Paris

A draft of the "strategic compass", the first White paper on European defence, was released to Member States in last December. Astonishingly, the phrase "strategic autonomy" appears only once. And it is only mentioned with the aim of reducing its scope since the paper says that "this Strategic Compass will enhance the EU's strategic autonomy and its ability to work with partners to safeguard its values and interests", which is a diplomatic oxymoron.

At the same time, the coalition agreement between the political parties that will rule Germany in the coming months and years does not contain any reference to strategic autonomy. However, it does mention "strategic sovereignty", the latest semantic innovation in the fertile ground of European gibberish, whose goal is none other than to please the French without frightening the Atlanticists.

One wonders, after Donald Trump's whims, Recep Tayyip Erdogn's outbursts, Russia's provocations and the uncoordinated departure of NATO forces from Afghanistan, whether Europeans still strive for strategic autonomy. Why such a renouncement?

First, the goal is neither clear nor ardently desired

The fact is that strategic autonomy has three faces.[1]

The original one, should be sought in the Franco-British declaration of Saint-Malo on 4th December 1998, which gave rise, after much shilly-shallying, to the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) enshrined in the Treaty of Lisbon in 2007. It applies only to the management of international crises in the Union's immediate neighbourhood through the dispatch of an expeditionary force, when the Americans do not want to get involved. In theory, it is fully compatible with NATO but in practice it has never been implemented. Proof of this is the Union's inaction in Syria, Libya and, to a lesser extent, Mali.

The second understanding, which can be qualified as extended, was enshrined in the 2016 "Global Strategy of the European Union". It overlaps with the desire to ensure "an appropriate level" of military independence. The concept is no longer only about projecting power beyond the borders of the Union, but about the Union assuming responsibility "for its own security" both "within and beyond its borders"; desire which is reflected in the "level of ambition " of the Implementation plan of the Global Strategy and its three objectives: (i) "Responding to external conflicts and crises", (ii) "Capacity building of partners" and finally (iii) "Protecting the Union and its citizens". And it is precisely because it implies the defence of the Union on its own territory that this version of strategic autonomy has faced strong resistance from some Central European states as well as the Baltic and Nordic states, all anxious not to trigger the departure of American forces from European soil.

The third meaning, aimed at smoothing over disagreements, is a concept of strategic autonomy developed by the European authorities, encompassing trade, finance and investment. This is notably the vision of the High Representative/Vice-President of the Commission, Josep Borrell, in which strategic autonomy is almost the same thing as independence. It is also the one defended by the French President. But in the face of fears that this global strategic autonomy might conceal a form of protec-

Frédéric Mauro

Photo: private

is an Associate Research Fellow at the French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs (IRIS), and a Lawyer at the bar of Brussels. He is specialised in defence matters and legal questions related to the Common Security and Defence Policy. He is a former clerk of the House of the French Senate and spent the last years of his career at the "Foreign Affairs, Defence and Armed Forces Committee" where he took part at numerous works on procurement and defence research.

1 See Frédéric Mauro « l'autonomie stratégique, cet obscure objet du désir » in Analyse n° 13 IRIS - Octobre 2021, https://bit.ly/3KtacWG

EU High Representative Josep Borrell (right) together with Dmytro Kuleba, Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs, during a visit to Ukraine, 5-6 January 2022

photo: European Union, 2022, EC – Audiovisual Service / Genya Savilov

tionism, Emmanuel Macron finally proposed to use the even more all-encompassing term of "European sovereignty".
It is this third meaning that we find in the German coalition agreement hiding behind the phrase "strategic sovereignty" since it is a question of strengthening the "capacity for action (of the Union) in the global context and to be less dependent and less vulnerable in important strategic areas, such as energy supply, health, raw material imports and digital technology, without isolating Europe"[2]. In good French, this is called "drowning the fish". Indeed, what is the destination: crisis management, military independence, or independence writ large? As old Seneca said: "there is no favourable wind for the sailor who doesn't know where to go".
From this point of view the strategic compass provides the beginning of an answer: the desired strategic autonomy should be understood as the capacity to manage the full spectrum of crises and the beginning of some sort of military independence, especially with regards to cyber defence, although the collective defence of the European Union should continue to be ensured by NATO. Yet, Europeans are not at the end of their sorrows.

Second, the price to pay for strategic autonomy might be too high

The equation of strategic autonomy was clearly posed in Saint-Malo: if the European Union wants to play its "full role on the international stage", it must have: (i) a capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces, (ii) the means to decide to use them, and (iii) a readiness to do so. Since this equation is a multiplication, if only one of the terms is equal to zero, the total will also be equal to zero.

Let's start with the political will to achieve strategic autonomy. Whatever the form, very few countries really want it. All the Nordic, Baltic and Central European states are remotely concerned with crisis management and fully satisfied with US protection when it comes to collective defence. In addition, full independence is no more than a theoretical consideration for them. Germany and Italy for their part are trying to maintain a balance between the transatlantic relationship, especially its military dimension, and the European project. Breaking out of the status quo would require political will, which, for the moment, seems lacking.
Only France, Greece and to a lesser extent Spain seem genuinely willing to pursue strategic autonomy, although we don't know for sure that they have the same understanding of the phrase.
The ability to decide, is undoubtedly the most sensitive point, because it presupposes moving from the intergovernmental framework, in which decisions are taken unanimously, to a new framework in which decisions would be taken by a qualified majority. And here we find the whole ambiguity of the French position, which would like to see European strategic autonomy but is unable to give up its veto rights.

> "The strategic compass provides the beginning of an answer."

Capacity for action would be, finally, the easiest to achieve, provided of course that the first two elements are met. However, if we focus, as always, on capacity without having taken care to establish a "permanent" and "structured" decision-making procedure beforehand, there is a great risk of making the same mistakes that led to the abandonment of the Helsinki objective (1999) to constitute a European military capacity of 60,000 men (an army corps) or the establishment of tactical groups (2004).
It seems that the Strategic Compass has clearly identified the question of the ability to decide, which also includes common funding. But it must still come up with a more convincing answer than simply identifying the problems. Member States will consult in the spring and the President of the Commission will present the results of their consultation in May 2022. To be continued...

2 Mehr Fortschritt wagen - Bündnis für Freiheit, Gerechtigkeit und Nachhaltigkeit https://bit.ly/32MVcbF