

STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN THE CONTEXT OF MULTILATERALISM

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The Covid-19 Pandemic has reignited the idea of Strategic Autonomy in the UE. While Brussels has insisted over the last 5 years that Europe should become a major player in defense issues, one has to wonder if the relations with NATO and EU will not change under these circumstances. With the Biden Administration willing to build some bridges with EU it will be interesting to analyze the way the European Union will be able to manage both the development of strategic autonomy while also keeping its multilateral agreements with traditional partners.

It is the aim of this paper to analyze the post-pandemic global context into which the UE finds itself and to study the impact that strategic autonomy may have on the member states of the EU, taking into consideration not just defense and security policies, but also economic policies, healthcare issues, the energetic system and the geographical impact that differs for each member state. By doing so we hope to determine what are some way ahead for the EU in its pursue of an increased global player, while becoming a regional leader in the European-Asian and Transatlantic landscape.

Key words: *strategic autonomy, deterrence, security policy, multilateralism, common defense.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of strategic autonomy has been developed after France President Macron first spoke of it in 2018. First introduced in 2013, as an idea for the EU to have a bigger role in defense policy, strategic autonomy has become a key principle for the development of the Common Security and Defense Policy at

European level. Furthermore, Strategic Autonomy is now part of the European Union Global Strategy. In this matter Strategic Autonomy will become part of the doctrine to enhance defense capabilities at an EU level.

The results of this doctrine is supposed to materialize into the now broad European Defense

Fund, a common funding policy that would see member states of the EU contribute in order to develop security and defense capabilities that should answer to risk and threats that are particular for the European Continent and neighbor areas. It is the specific desire of the European Commission that the EU develop a Strategic Autonomy and its inception be in the area of defense.

During the Trump administration and the America First policy that the American president enabled the need to further develop strategic autonomy has been considered a priority for European leaders. The fact that the US through NATO has insisted on the need for increased defense expenditures from member states in Europe, that would see up to a 2% of the GDP spent on the military budget didn't help the transatlantic relations between EU and NATO and has determined the European Commission to further look on ways and means to develop its own strategic defense assets. For this reason the EU first developed the Common Security and Defense Policy and by doing so managed to introduce the concept of a Europe that should be strategically independent or at least autonomous in order for the EU to fully shift from a regional power and player to that of a major global player, not just in terms of politics and economy but also in matter of security and defense. Although the concept was original

initiated by France it has been since then expanded at the entire level of the EU.

With the beginning of the Biden Administration a question was addressed on whether strategic autonomy should still be required or whether multilateral relations between the US and the UE would be sufficient in order to let all defense issues and challenges on NATO's defense planning process.

The COVID-19 pandemic that has emerged beginning with 2020 has demonstrated that the need for strategic autonomy expands beyond defense policies. Healthcare issues, energetic and economic challenges, social and political aspects should also generate the need for the EU to develop its own strategic autonomy.

In 2020, the concept of strategic autonomy, become one of the major governing principles in Brussels. UE officials have started to stress more and more often the necessity of introducing strategies and measures in order to stimulate autonomy or even sovereignty at strategic level. The fields on which this can be made, far exceed that of defense and can include all area from digitalization, green energy, and pharmaceuticals and so on.

In the following chapters we are going to analyze the areas where the EU tends to develop this concept and the pros and cons for the direction that the EU has taken into

this strategic concept. The reason for this approach is that the European Union's strategy concerning some of the major challenges observed in the last 5 years have been controversial. Whether or not strategic autonomy is possible, is a good idea, it creates frictions with other states or partnerships is to be debated and discussed.

2. STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN DEFENSE

Strategic autonomy in the area of security and defense policies has been the major desired concept that the EU considered a key element in its enhanced role as a global power.

One issue of concern is that of the relation between NATO and EU. For over 60 years, defense policies in the European Union have been managed and monitored by NATO.

A shift in paradigm in this area would represent a new starting point for the EU that would find itself in the situation of redefining its role from an economic and political organization to one that would generate capabilities and missions with defense purpose.

In this aspect, it has to be noted that the EU is far from realizing strategic autonomy in defense. With a major member state like Germany underfunding defense, with the UK leaving the EU following the Brexit, and with countries like France, Spain or Italy in a geographical position that would make it difficult for them

to send rapid deployment forces to European borders in the north and east, such a strategic autonomy cannot be achieved. On the other side with strategically placed bases both in Central Europe and in the Eastern Flank, NATO is the only well suited alliance to cope with defense issues on European ground.

Another aspect worth mentioning is that of the energy crisis that has appeared in 2021 at European Level. The increased policies for a green deal and the development of Nord Stream 2 create a series of vulnerabilities for European countries in front of potential Russian actions.

First, having the energy flow controlled by just one source country creates potential uncertainties and makes European countries dependent of one supplier. Monopoly situations like these are problematic for security reasons as a shortage of energy could create massive damage.

Second, experts consider that through the Nord Stream 2, Russia can also place different technologies that can be used for intelligence purpose. Thus an economical factor that is supposed to increased EU's role as a major player will actually affect Europe's so called strategic autonomy in the field of defense.

Another key element that needs to be addressed is that of the different status that EU countries have. With a large difference in wages and the possibility of social dumping for states in Central and

Eastern Europe, strategic autonomy should be implemented only if the differences between these states were to be reduced. For European countries that are emerging economies it would otherwise be very difficult to understand the need for a strategic autonomy, while they are left without their classic partnerships, partnerships that has over the last 20 years increased their economic output. In order to fully create a European space that would be willing to understand the need for a unique autonomous body at European level, that could emerge as a global leader, first, all European member states

should find themselves in a situation where the gaps between the West and the East, or the North and the South should at least be decreased.

The reason for which we address this issues is that with different objective for different states, we can see from the specialized literature that depending on what group of countries they are part of, European member states address the topic of strategic autonomy very differently. This example can be seen in Fig 1 that comes from a study on European member states. (Franke, Varma, 2019).

How important is the goal of European strategic autonomy to your country's foreign and defence policy?

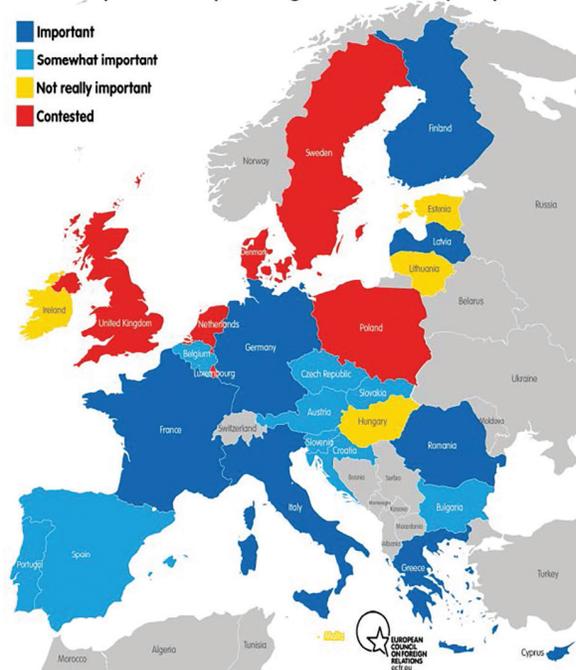


Fig. 1. How important is the goal of European strategic autonomy for member states.

The picture above shows that for different groups of countries, the importance of developing a strategic autonomy is more or less important. While for France and Germany it is a relevant factor, we can see that for countries like UK who has left the EU, since the study was conducted or for countries like Poland and Hungary that are part of the Visegrad group, this concept does not matter or even worse is a reason for further fragmentation inside the EU. For many Central European countries it is a somehow but not decisive factor of importance. Having such diverse opinions on this subject for European member states is important because it brings into discussion the risk of further increasing euro-skepticism inside the European Union. This can create even more issues for security and defense objectives, as a fragmented Europe is in the end, the opposite of developing a cohesive structure that can act as a unit at an international level. In simpler words, the desired effects of what strategic autonomy could mean for Europe might just have the opposite outcomes.

Strategic autonomy should be a top priority for all member states if it were to work. The fact that is not means there are reasons for which countries inside the EU react to it differently. This once again shows that there is a lack of unity inside the EU, and that unity should be further developed upon, until such strong concept like strategic autonomy were to be implemented.

The same study (Franke, Varma, 2019) addresses whether the economic side to defense, rather than the tactical one is the reason for developing this concept for some countries. Following the year 2014, when at the NATO Summit of Wales many European countries like Romania, Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia agreed to increase their budget on defense to 2% of the GDP, experts have considered that countries like France that have an important defense industry would want the EU to develop security and defense policies in order to help integrate their defense industries better. Because of this reason the conclusion from Figure 2 are worth observing and analyzing:

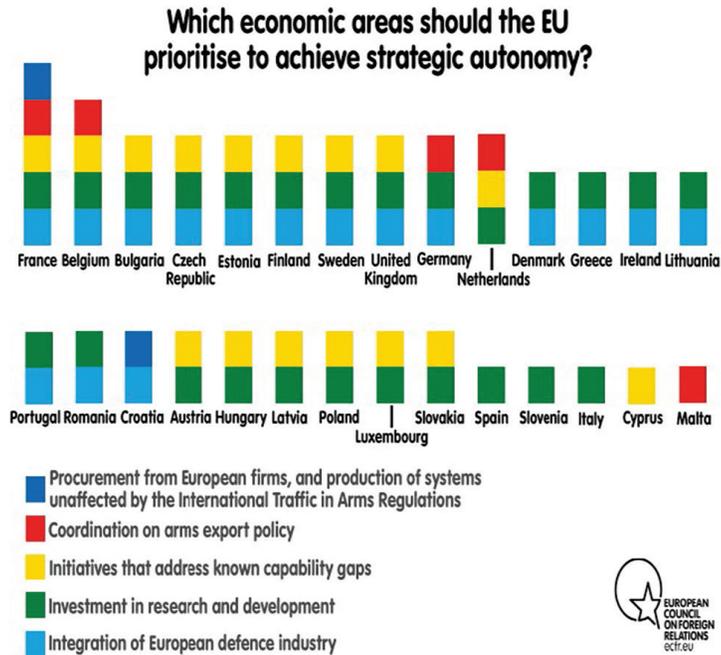


Fig. 2. Which economic areas should the EU prioritize to achieve strategic autonomy?

While for most European member states investing in R&D and integrating the European defence industry seems to be the major role that a strategic autonomous concept could bring inside the EU doctrine, for countries like France, Belgium or Germany, coordination in arms export, developing capabilities and especially procuring military equipment from European producers (in the case of France) becomes a major factor, which again shows that are differences in perception between

different groups of countries. The lack of cohesion for EU member states in terms of what autonomy in defense could actually mean will be problematic in the cohesion process that should enable the European Union to have a major role at global level in challenges that are concerned with security and defense.

If the reasons that have been presented so far induce the idea that strategic autonomy has a series of flows for which it might be difficult to implement at European level,

there should be listed a number of advantages that enables EU to make this concept part of its Global Strategy.

In the area of nuclear weapons, such a concept represents the only option for the EU that comprises both nuclear and non-nuclear member states to have a unique voice and a unified role when communicating with other nuclear powers.

Another aspect that needs to be taken into consideration is that of digitalization. Modern and innovative technology is one of the key tools that major powers have in order to progress and develop both their defense structures and their economic assets. Studies show that while EU member states were competing with the US in terms of emerging technologies in the 90's, by 2030, China will be the number one political power in the field of digitalization, bypassing US, while the UE, might fall behind China, US, Russia and potentially other emerging economies as well.

Only by developing strategic autonomy can the EU reduce the gap it has in terms of digitalization compared to other major global players. The effects of lagging behind in this field can be observed both in defense risks and in social and welfare shortfalls as well.

To better understand the importance of digitalization, security threats and overall advantages and disadvantages that the concept of strategic autonomy brings inside the EU, we have chosen to present the effects that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on the previously mentioned issues at hand in the following chapter.

3. STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The Covid-19 Pandemic has started in the early first trimester of 2020 and has expanded throughout 2021, with visible results in the decrease of the pandemic being observed starting with mid-2021 after vaccination against the virus became available worldwide.

The pandemic allowed the understanding of how two major fields of development for the EU, pharmaceutical and digitalization could be enhanced in crisis situation, that required innovative and fast solution, as the life of EU citizens was at stake. Some states have used their military capabilities including human resource from defense staff (Portugal, Romania) to try and manage the pandemic.

Interconnectivity between countries inside the EU had its share

of shortfalls as the pandemic spread fast inside the European Territory. For this reason, the European Commission understood that the strategic autonomy concept should be expanded from the defense field to that of economy and technology. Under this line of thinking in September 2020, the EU Council created an economic recovery packaged as a major step into achieving the desired strategic autonomy. This was seen as the only possible solution for countries facing economic struggles after dealing with the pandemic. In the same year, the European Union Commission developed an initiative on raw materials, specifically on those critical raw materials that were missing during the pandemic. The initiative was created to assure that EU member states would decrease their dependency on imports for a number of resources that are considered crucial in the area of pharmaceuticals, digitalization and green energy. (Binnendijk et al., 2021)

With a large amount of activities being moved in an online environment (education being such example), the role of digitalization and its enhanced role in all life activities become a new desired outcome for Brussels in terms of strategic autonomy. As such technology is now part of the concept and the digital

world is already considered a field by which the EU can drive its own global standards through regulations. As such, starting with 2020, the EU is doing efforts into obtaining data sovereignty, by developing its own data strategy as part of the European Union Global Strategy. One of the desired outcomes is the creation of a European Cloud, while defense challenges will also be taken care off by means of developing better prevention against cyberattacks.

The Covid-19 Pandemic can therefore be considered a factor that has enhanced the political will inside the EU to further develop and promote strategic autonomy. It is a shared opinion inside the EU that the moment for organization to become a global power is now. With China's increase as a global power, with higher competitiveness between major player in field of economy, technology and defense, EU tries to catch up and the pandemic has shown different directions in which this can happen.

Those who oppose this direction, highlight China's interest in making the EU less dependent on the US, by observing China's open support of the European Union's strategic autonomy development. China hopes to increase its cooperation in trade and economic relationships with the EU, while

isolating the US from transatlantic cooperation. These efforts should be countered, if not in the economic field, at least in those of defense, and guarantees have been presented by Defense Ministers throughout Europe, Germany includes, that the US remains Europe's most important ally, and all actions undertaken by the EU in matters of defense will strengthen the European pillar inside of NATO. (European Student Think Thank, 2021). Furthermore, the Biden administration has attempted to reconcile with the EU, develop security cooperation between the two transatlantic partners, while building a common stance against China. These attempts have somehow been affected by the AUKUS Agreement in which the US has decided to cooperate closely with Australia and UK and by doing so assuring defense equipment trades between the three countries. This has left France out of its current agreements with Australia and therefore tensions between partners increased even more. The recent G20 Summit in Rome has shown that there are ways by which France and USA can work through these tensions.

In a post pandemic world, where resilience is one of the major subject at hand, Europe will search further on to develop its strategic autonomy, now extended on more

field then before the pandemic struck. Following current events, and due to the developed relation with the Biden administration the EU states that is trying to integrate its strategic autonomy with a strong transatlantic cooperation with USA.

The pandemic has shown interesting facts about the EU's dependency on the US, which has decreased over the last decade, but on the other hand, EU has shown an unfortunate enormous dependency on China. Therefore future efforts inside the EU should be developed not necessarily in increasing EU's strategic autonomy towards the US, but towards China as well. Speaking about the multilateral relations the EU has had for several decades with the US and how these relations could evolve in future, the following chapter will address the relationship between EU's strategic Autonomy and The United States of America as well as NATO.

4. STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN RELATIONS TO THE US

Ever since the idea of strategic autonomy appeared inside the EU, the question has been how this concept would affect the relationship with the US. In terms of the political context, during the Trump administration, Brussels

has pushed to increase autonomy, because of the America First Policy implemented in the US. (Pike, 2021), While opinions suggested that the multilateral partnership would be once again reignited under the Biden administration, one factor that has increased the desire to increase European strategic autonomy has been the US Afghanistan pullout, where the difference between USA and the EU in terms of capabilities capable of actually pulling out troops and refugees has been visible. EU's intervention capabilities need to be improves and for this reason both France and Germany have decided to initiate the creation a so called initial entry force, that would include up to 5000 troops supporter by aircraft capacity and forces from the navy, especially different types of vessels and ships. Under the doctrine of increased global development expenditures, the creation of such rapid-reaction force would enhance EU's defense capacity and provide the necessary aid for struggling democracies that require assistance, in the vicinity of the European Union. (European Union External Action Service, 2021).

After decades of being a soft power, through the development of strategic autonomy, the EU has managed to become a hard power as

well. The formal intent is to however develop a hard power role as a NATO partner, while also taking a stance as more important and reliable international actor.

When the EU wants a major global role, it does so looking at current global leaders such as USA, Russia and China and the economic relations it can build with three countries. Furthermore the EU needs to analyze the trilateral relations that China Russia and USA develop between themselves, and by doing so understanding its own role in the transatlantic alliance on short, medium and long term. (Howorth, 2018).

One of the major issues where USA and EU contradict is on threat perceptions. While the US has been worried in recent years much more on the Far East, China Sea and Taiwan, for EU, the Eastern Flank and Russia's role in the Baltics, Black Sea and the East of Ukraine remains a major concern. However, if there is a divergence of opinions on these risk, the Middle East remains a converging point for EU-US cooperation.

The recent Afghan withdrawal from US troops has left a gap in the region, one that China and Russia can explore, as the Taliban seem willing to negotiate with both

countries, as well as other neighbors like Turkey and Pakistan. Therefore, it is up to the EU and NATO to once again collaborate as there is a sense of urgency, with potentially millions of refugees and immigrants coming from Afghanistan flooding the borders on Europe’s Eastern Flank. Collaboration between the two institutions is therefore a must, and

the relevancy of the Eastern Flank can be seen better in Figure 3, when we see a very diverging response when European member states answer the question of *whether Europe needs greater solidarity on defense and security by moving towards strategic autonomy?* (Franke, Varma, 2019).

Figure 3 brings in a major observation. For almost all Eastern



Fig. 3. How EU countries perceive solidarity on defense bases on strategic autonomy.

Flank countries, as well as for the UK, defense in Europe should not move towards strategic autonomy, as NATO's Article 5 is sufficient. However, we can see that for most western states, such a desire represents a goal. Therefore we see a big gap in perspective between the East and the West of the EU on this matter. Countries being part of the Eastern Flank seem more aware of Russian risks and threats and therefore rely more on NATO, than on potential European Defense Capabilities developed with the Strategic Autonomy concept.

Because of their understanding of risks and threats on the Eastern Flank these countries have organized themselves into The Three Sea Initiative, a flexible and informal platform that groups around 12 member states of the EU, situated between the Adriatic, Baltic and Black Seas (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia). All of these countries look to further strengthen their collaboration with the US. Another objective is the increased convergence and cohesion between member states of the organization, in parallel with reducing the gap in terms of economic development between different regions within the EU. Just

like with EU's strategic autonomy, the three sea initiative seeks to increase interconnectivity in the region in the areas of energy, transportation and digitalization. The Three Sea initiative has too objective similar to that of EU's strategic autonomy such as promoting economic growth and increasing European cohesion, but also presents a third objective, which is perhaps different, that of consolidating transatlantic networking with the United States of America (#3SeasInitiative, 2019).

The answers from Figure 3 and the creation of Three Sea Initiative should trigger an alarm for the EU leaders in Brussels. The development of Strategic Autonomy based on a Europe independent of the US, can create inside the EU a similar concept, where countries on the Eastern Flank who deal with risk and threats much different than those from Western Europe will react and create even more enhanced connections with the US on their own, while isolating themselves from initiatives that come from Brussels and western member states of the EU.

In order for the strategic autonomy concept to therefore work, the EU should better understand all its member states needs and try to first integrate their goals into the EU Global Strategy, while also reducing the gap

that exists between different groups of states. The mindset of Eastern European Countries demonstrates that a European Union that doesn't collaborate with US is unimaginable for them and pushing for such an agenda could further increase the potential fragmentation of the EU.

5. CONCLUSIONS & ACKNOWLEDGMENT

In trying to draw some conclusion from the previous chapters, it is clear that EU will not take a step back in developing its own defense capabilities. This will be the road for the future for the EU, a road that started in 2018, with The Capability Development Plan, a road that has taken further development, following the Covid-19 economic disruption. The Capability Development Plan promotes capability cohesion with NATO and that should remain a goal for the EU, as risks and threats coming from China, Russia and the Middle East make it as viable as ever for the two organizations to work together.

While the EU is right in trying to become a major role player at global level, the path to assure this draws some questions. Strategic Autonomy for the EU has started in the field of defense, a field where the EU is less than prepared to manage

on itself. This perception is visible inside Europe, where countries on the Eastern Flank are willing to only rely on NATO for military support and the development of defense capabilities. In the area of energy power, the EU has put itself in a position where it cannot obtain strategic autonomy, because on the one hand Germany and many other member states have based their reliance on one major supplier, which is the Russian Federation. On the other hand, France continues to invest in its nuclear energy sector, while countries from the East like Poland and Romania are forced to give up their coal industry. These actions create tensions inside the EU, and increases the risk of Euroscepticism and further fragmentation of the European Union.

Strategic autonomy can still be obtained and the Covid-19 Pandemic has been an example of good collaboration of EU's institutions with member states, vaccines being available in high amounts for all countries inside the European Union. The economic aid that the EU has given for member states following the pandemic is also an example on how autonomy in this field should work. Digitalization and the development of innovative technology is another field where enhanced strategic autonomy could produce the desired effects.

One must consider however, that this autonomy should not be obtained against the US, but rather focus more on China and its policy of take and replicate technology that is produced by foreign investors including those from Europe on its territory.

Taking all of these variables into the equation, the role of a global power for the EU is to be taken. While still in a initial phase, the concept of strategic autonomy remains one of the European's Union desired long term goals.

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