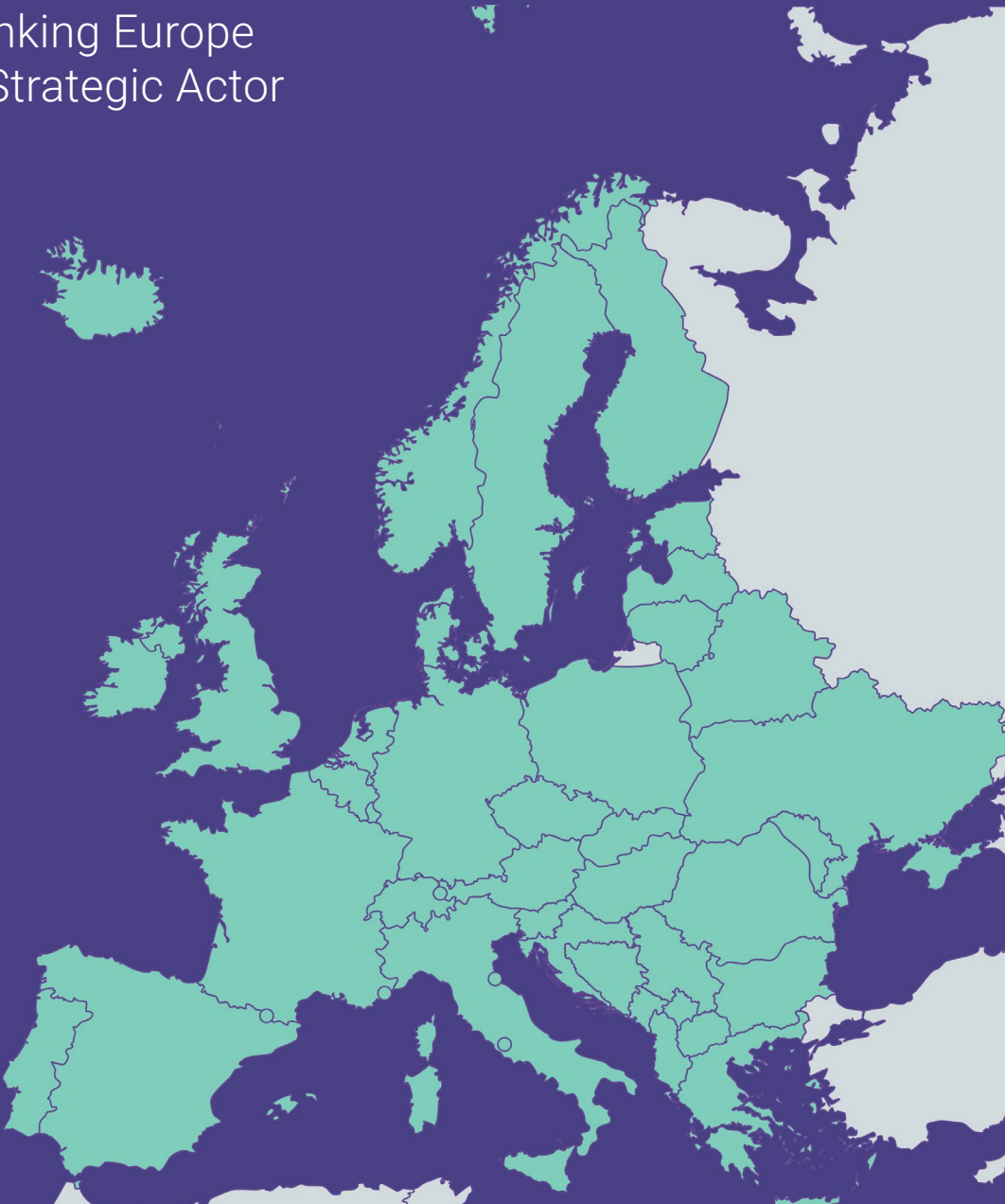# Beyond Autonomy

Rethinking Europe
as a Strategic Actor

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Introduction: Beyond Autonomy

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Overview

In recent years the concept of 'strategic autonomy' has gained unprecedented prominence in policy debates across the European continent and the EU, motivated by a combination of internal and external drivers. Internally, the departure of the United Kingdom precipitated a crisis of integration and brought about strong pressure within Brussels to fill the gap left by the departure of a major security actor and to demonstrate the continued viability of European integration, the consequence of which were a host of new security and defence initiatives aimed at bringing about greater autonomy. Externally, the realisation that the EU finds itself in a more dangerous world than previously has contributed to increasing talk of the benefits of autonomy, motivated not only by the rise of non-democratic actors such as China and the actions of Russia in Europe's near abroad, but also by the realisation that American interests lie increasingly outside of Europe, with fear of American disengagement peaking during the bombastic presidency of Donald Trump.

And yet, while the concept of strategic autonomy has proven valuable for a number of reasons, and while its emergence on the European policy scene is overdetermined given the number of problems it seemingly solves, confusion abounds as to what strategic autonomy involves in practice. Indeed, there are a number of important questions we can ask about strategic autonomy: For what is autonomy being sought, and against which 'other' is autonomy desired? Where does the preoccupation with autonomy come from, and when will it need to be achieved? How desirable is autonomy, and is it an achievable goal in reality? What is the politics of autonomy, and how do different actors assess its desirability? How does autonomy relate to other allied concepts, and does the term autonomy make the most sense? On these crucial questions the existing debate on strategic autonomy has few clear answers, either because there is no consensus, because the heavily politicised debate elides the question, or because the issues at stake are freshly on the policy agenda.

The prominence of strategic autonomy in the contemporary debate on the future of Europe, combined with its evident complexity and contestability, makes it more important than ever to engage with these questions. In this brief introduction, we aim to set the scene for the debate which follows, in three respects. First, we set out the aim of this volume to go beyond autonomy, which involves moving beyond existing assumptions in five key respects: (1) conceptually - beyond the term 'autonomy'; (2) thematically - beyond the security and defence domain; (3) geographically - beyond Europe and 'the West'; (4) temporally - beyond our present time-horizons; and (5) politically - beyond the views of European elites. Second, we set out some key questions we might ask about strategic autonomy which follow from the broader perspective of moving 'beyond autonomy', focusing in particular on (i) the referents of autonomy and the actors involved, (ii) the temporality of the concept and its past and future; (iii) the desirability and viability of autonomy,

(iv) the politics of the concept, and (v) the relation between autonomy and related concepts. Third, we provide an overview of the individual briefings which make up this volume, setting out the arguments made by our contributors, which examine key aspects of autonomy, namely: (a) the conceptual link with 'strategic sovereignty' (Daniel Fiott); (b) the desirability of a common strategic culture (Payam Ghalehdar), (c) the meaning of autonomy in the tech sector (Raluca Csernatoni); (d) the emerging EU-US-China 'triangle' (Andrew Cottey); and (5) the travails of European security cooperation (Gerlinde Groitl).

Beyond Autonomy

This volume comes out of a high-level workshop hosted by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation and LSE IDEAS over the summer of 2021 which invited distinguished academics and policymakers to reflect on the meaning of strategic autonomy and to discuss its implications for the EU and for European security more broadly. The aim of the workshop was to move 'beyond autonomy' by thinking critically about the concept itself and the different ways in which it has been understood in recent years. This is a necessary step, both for moving the debate forward and affording us the space to challenge long-standing assumptions, the latter being especially important now that the term strategic autonomy has become commonplace across the European political landscape. This volume helps to move the discussion beyond autonomy by subjecting existing, taken-for-granted articulations of the concept to critical scrutiny. As with the event, contributors were asked to suggest ways of moving beyond existing debates on strategic autonomy in order to highlight new and emerging issues with implications for European autonomy.

Summarising the volume, we argue that there are five distinct respects in which the contributions help us to move beyond autonomy: (1) Conceptual. The contributors move beyond the established term of 'strategic autonomy' by asking how the concept relates to alternative depictions, what the core meaning ascribed to autonomy should be, and what other terms might usefully be deployed to capture Europe's interests. (2) Thematic. The contributions seek to move beyond the current focus on foreign, security and defence policy towards a broader conceptualisation which accounts for the ways in which strategic autonomy is shaping a host of other policy domains, including technology and healthcare. (3) Geographical. The authors move beyond existing depictions of Europe in the world and European preferences and ask how the changing international order implications the quest for autonomy, what the rise of new power-centres means for the concept, and how external actors view strategic autonomy. (4) Temporal. The contributions move beyond the zeitgeist of contemporary Europe and examine the future of strategic autonomy, how the concept is implicated by emerging trends, and how these compare with previous narratives surrounding autonomy. (5) Political. The authors in this volume move beyond the existing narrative of strategic autonomy as a shared, European goal and ask which actors endorse the concept, which are sceptical of it, and where divergence exists in how the concept is understood.

Taking a critical approach to strategic autonomy that seeks to move beyond existing depictions of the concept allows us to highlight a number of key questions which have heretofore been under-analysed in existing debates. In the next section we briefly suggest five areas where moving 'beyond autonomy' can help uncover new and useful questions for both policymakers and

scholars, discussing: (1) The referent(s) of autonomy (*What are we securing? And from what?*); (2) the timing of autonomy (*Where does the concept come from? What does it posit for the future?*); (3) the desirability and viability of autonomy (*Do we want it? Is it achievable?*); (4) the politics of autonomy (*Who wants it and who does not?*); and (5) the labelling of autonomy (*Are we using the right term? How does it relate to others?*).

Key Questions

Important questions can, first off, be asked about what the referent(s) of efforts to achieve autonomy is/are, both regarding what is being made more autonomous, and in relation to which 'other'. Within Europe, for instance, does strategic autonomy apply to the EU itself or to the broader architecture of European security within which the EU is but one actor? While it is principally EU policymakers and representatives of EU member states who have spoken about autonomy, different versions of the concept can be either more or less EU-centric. EU strategic autonomy by its very nature excludes core defence actors like the UK and Turkey and views autonomy as inherently linked to EU interests, and is perhaps more difficult to conceive of - at least in the medium-term - than European strategic autonomy which may comprise multiple frameworks and incorporate more major strategic actors. Then there is the question of the actor(s) from which autonomy is to be obtained. While narrower conceptions of strategic autonomy emphasise the need for Europeans to hedge against the potential departure of the United States from the regional security system, more expansive concepts imagine autonomy involving efforts to prevent external actors more generally from unduly influencing policy decisions in Europe and to decrease areas of potential vulnerability across the board. This is closely connected to discussions about the domains within which Europeans should be seeking to achieve greater autonomy, and where the limits of the concept lie thematically. One might reasonably here contrast minimalist conceptions where the emphasis is on foreign, security and defence policies, traditionally defined, and more expansive variants which would extend the concept into a host of other policy domains, including trade, healthcare, technology, and industrial policy.

It is important, also, to ask about the timeline of strategic autonomy, starting with the question of where the concern for autonomy emerges from. Brexit-induced internal dynamics as well as fears of American disengagement stemming from the tumultuous years of the Trump Presidency are often cited as the motivator for autonomy. But the latter concern pre-dates the Brexit vote, and many of the initiatives now justified under the concept of strategic autonomy had earlier origins or emerged out of pre-existing schemes, both in the fallout of the 2014 Ukraine crisis and the earlier Treaty of Lisbon, which laid much of the groundwork for Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). And echoes of the autonomy debate can be found in the earliest discussions surrounding the establishment of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) at the 1998 St Malo summit, with much the same themes and concerns in evidence, as well as earlier debates on the possibility of a European 'pillar' of NATO. On the other 'side' of the temporal dimension, it is not clear what the timeframe for achieving strategic autonomy is, and whether the concept refers to gradual efforts to hedge against American disengagement and lay the ground for European alternatives, or whether it envisages a more rapid shift to indigenous European structures in the coming several years. The timeframe for autonomy has a number of implications, including the

kind and severity of practical steps European states will need to take, the political acceptability of autonomy (and when a consensus will be required), and the appropriate time frame for assessing whether autonomy has been meaningfully achieved.

Important questions can also be asked about both the desirability and the viability of strategic autonomy in its different guises, since neither may be reasonably taken for granted. Proponents view strategic autonomy as a necessary means of hedging against external threats and defending European interests in a dangerous and less certain world, noting that Europe depends too much on the waning American security commitment and does not make the most of its own (latent) capabilities. But critics contend that talk of autonomy diminishes the willingness of Europeans to invest in the Atlantic alliance, creates inefficiencies by duplicating the functions of other organisations (such as NATO), creates unhelpful pressures towards greater protectionism and isolation from international order, and challenges the EU's identity as a normative (or civilian) actor in world affairs. Then there are questions about the viability of the concept itself. While some see increased autonomy as a realistic goal over the coming decades given the combined defence spending of European countries and the increased willingness to work together in security and defence, critics contend that if significant issues including the lack of domestic political will, the absence of a shared strategic culture, the presence of myriad competing frameworks for European security, and Europe's inability to *think strategically* will continue to hamper movement towards greater autonomy, as they have in the decades gone by.

Then there is a need to pay attention to the complex politics of strategic autonomy. Within Europe and the EU, distinct actors have their own preferences not only on the desirability of autonomy, but what the concept should entail. Unsurprisingly, among European nations, Atlanticist states tend to favour more minimal conceptions of autonomy than their more Europeanist counterparts, while within the EU institutions themselves, support for autonomy varies depending on the institution in question and the political and sectoral affiliations of specific groupings within the institutions. There is also a political economy of autonomy, with pan-European defence firms seeing in the concept the possibility of increased support and funding, but national industries also fearful of the potential implications of European defence-industrial consolidation. Yet the politics of strategic autonomy has also taken place at the level of elites more so than at the level of public opinion, with the preferences of neither citizens nor parties on the issue wholly clear-cut. Externally, too, the politics of strategic autonomy are complex. The United States, for instance, views developments aimed at increased EU autonomy with suspicion and as an inefficient duplicate of existing American-led structured, whilst at the same time seeing value in European commitments to spend more on their own defence.

Finally, we can ask about the term autonomy itself, what it specifically refers to in the context of Europe's foreign relations, and whether it captures adequately the kind of policies which its adherents have in mind. This is all the more necessary given the growth in use in recent years of sovereignty, as an alternative conception, with such specific variations as 'strategic sovereignty' and 'European sovereignty' appearing alongside sector specific terms like 'data sovereignty' and 'tech sovereignty'. Moreover, the term strategic autonomy has itself been subject to variation, as with the emergence of 'open strategic autonomy' as a more liberal variant. Key terms like 'principled pragmatism', 'statecraft', 'actorness', and 'independence' also impinge on debates linked to strategic autonomy and have acted in the past as partial synonyms for the

concept. Divergence within the lexicon of European foreign relations is not surprising, but it does raise important questions about the meaning of autonomy and its appropriateness relative to alternative ways of articulating European interests. It also raises the difficult question of 'what's in a name?' and the extent to which autonomy is an essentially contested concept on which none can agree, or whether it is rather a problem of applying a specific label to priorities on which all can agree. Either way, as always, language is important, and the politics of labelling will likely only gain in importance.

Contributions to the Volume

The individual contributions featured here showcase the perspectives of invited participants on strategic autonomy and, in so doing, help to move the debate forward in several key respects. First, the contributions outline new perspectives on strategic autonomy which have not featured prominently in the existing debate. Second, they offer a more critical take on the concept which takes neither the meaning nor the necessity of autonomy for granted, but which aims to interrogate both the feasibility of the concept as well as its political implications. Third, the contributions each offer specific and tailored recommendations to policymakers based on the authors' engagement with the concept, helping to connect the conceptual discussion of autonomy with the necessary real-world steps policymakers might take in the coming years. This section sets out in brief the arguments offered by the five contributors to this edited volume:

In the first briefing, titled 'A Clash of Concepts? Making Sense of 'European Sovereignty' and 'Strategic Autonomy", **Daniel Fiott** looks at the recent rise of the concept of strategic or European sovereignty. Fiott examines recent usage of the term sovereignty and asks what distinguishes it from conceptions of autonomy, noting that while both terms have some overlaps, at the core of sovereignty lie deeper questions about the locus of political authority. While it may be necessary to enhance the EU's capacity to act, he also suggests it is imperative to think about how the agency of European citizens might be maintained in light of social and technological change, a task which requires greater attention to the relationship between citizens and the state in Europe. In conclusion, Fiott cautions efforts to pin down the meaning of both autonomy and sovereignty, noting the value of challenging and re-moulding such concepts in a healthy democratic society. Rather, he argues that the focus should be on efforts to give the concepts practical meaning, and to think about how the goals to which they refer might be achieved in practice.

In his briefing—'Why a Common EU Strategic Culture Is Neither Necessary Nor Desirable'— **Payam Ghalehdar** examines the complex relationship between strategic autonomy and efforts to foster a shared European strategic culture. Whilst demonstrating that Europe is a long way from developing a shared strategic culture, and assessing recent proposals to bring about greater convergence in this area, Ghalehdar suggests we should be sceptical about both the effectiveness and desirability of such efforts. Not only will a common strategic culture be very difficult to bring about - since cultures evolve over decades, not years - but it is also not clear why a shared strategic culture is necessary, that it would solve problems rather than introduce new ones, and what the impact would be on Europe's 'civilian' foreign policy identity. Ghalehdar argues it is imperative that the Strategic Compass avoids creating undue expectations about a common

strategic culture emerging in the medium-term and encourages Europeans to view the diversity of strategic cultures on the continent as an asset rather than a liability. He also calls for a reflection on the implications of a shared strategic culture for Europe's 'civilian' identity.

In her briefing 'Disruption Ahead? European Strategic Autonomy and Future Technology', **Raluca Csernatoni** argues that Europe must not only navigate an increasingly hostile international environment, but must also adjust to a world in which traditional policies and allegiances will be outpaced by new forms of geopolitical competition and technological transformation. To understand the challenge in greater detail, her chapter explores the origins of strategic autonomy in defence-industrial and technological initiatives, moving beyond the existing contours of the autonomy debate. Csernatoni examines the trade-offs between economic openness and tech sovereignty, calling for the adoption of a credible industrial and technological strategy across key tech sectors, matched by EU funding and greater efforts at fostering a common strategic mindset between member states and institutions, in order to connect political thinking with capability-building priorities. She concludes that Europe needs to reconcile its quest for the sovereignty with commitments to strategic openness and multilateral cooperation in collaboration with trusted partners.

Andrew Cottey, in his chapter on 'Europe, Strategic Autonomy and the China Question: A Multitude of Dilemmas', situates the debate on autonomy in relation to shifts in the global balance of power, arguing that while the concept of autonomy emerged in discussions on the transatlantic relationship, the EU must now contend with a more complex EU-US-China 'triangle'. Cottey surveys the changing economic and geostrategic relationship between Europe and China over the past decades, noting European efforts to compartmentalise these aspects as well as the potential for discord with Washington which these efforts bring about. Nonetheless, he argues that Europe and the US can best maintain their autonomy from China by working together, even if it requires compromise between them, and he suggests that both sides undertake efforts to reduce their dependence on China whilst maintaining a cooperative and open trading relationship with Beijing.

Finally, in the closing briefing, 'The Eu at a Crossroads: Strategic Autonomy as Strategically-Adept Sovereignty', **Gerlinde Groitl** looks at Europe's ability to counteract international decline. Although EU member states possess significant capabilities in aggregate, she notes, they have been unable to translate these into meaningful collective external influence. The problem with talk of strategic autonomy, Groitl argues, is that it suggests the EU should aim to become an autonomous international actor in its own right, independent from the US in the defence realm. Instead, she suggests, the Union ought to aim to become a more strategically-adept actor which is better able to protect the sovereignty of its member states in concert with the US. Groitil concludes by stressing the need for Europeans to agree on a shared conception of the EU's value as a 'protective shield', to be realistic about the challenges of the changing external environment, and to eschew 'delusional' talk of an EU Army in place of strengthening EU-NATO relations.

Conclusion

Strategic autonomy has become *the buzzword of the European policy scene in recent years, with a slew of reports and policy proposals dedicated to the subject, and high-level support among European leaders. But big questions remain about what the concept actually means and what its implications are for Europe and the EU. Drawing on contributions to a recent high-level workshop as well as the five briefings contained in this volume, this introductory chapter has sought to make the case for moving 'beyond autonomy' in five key respects - conceptually, thematically, geographically, temporally, and politically. Only by doing this are we able to move the debate on autonomy forward and highlight a number of key debates and issues on which greater attention from policymakers is needed. In the subsequent chapters, the five briefings do just this, by highlighting new directions for policy debate and academic research on the concept of strategic autonomy, all of which take us into new domains.*

A Clash of Concepts?
Making Sense of 'European Sovereignty' and 'Strategic Autonomy'

Daniel Fiott

Introduction

When French President Emmanuel Macron addressed the Sorbonne in 2017, he explained that "[o]nly Europe can, in a word, guarantee genuine sovereignty or [Europe's] ability to exist in today's world to defend [its] values and interests" (Macron, 2017). It was a remarkable speech in that it was the first time that a European head of state had articulated a relatively new and contentious political concept in such depth. For President Macron, 'European sovereignty' has to be built in six areas: security, borders and migration, foreign policy, the ecological transition, digital technology and monetary and economic power. Since the speech, other European leaders have offered their own interpretation of 'European sovereignty'. For example, Chancellor Angela Merkel and other leaders have called for 'digital sovereignty' (Merkel, 2020; Politico Europe, 2021) whereas European Council President Charles Michel has called 'European sovereignty' or 'strategic autonomy' 'the aim of our generation' (Michel, 2020).

Despite the recent popularity of the term 'sovereignty', we must not overlook the historical baggage of such a term. Indeed, this makes it necessary to provide an understanding of the term in a European context and to also reflect on how it differs from the concept of 'strategic autonomy', which, of course, is also contested. In this respect, this policy brief clarifies the meaning of each term and it outlines their similarities and differences. In doing so, the brief argues that neither 'European sovereignty' or 'strategic autonomy' should be seen as ends in themselves, but rather as vehicles for asking profound questions about the future direction and political vitality of the European Union (EU). This brief argues that strategic autonomy should be seen as a historically contingent concept that represents a spectrum of political choices, whereas strategic sovereignty represents fundamental questions about political authority and the freedoms and security of citizens.

The meaning and value of 'autonomy'

Any account of the differences and similarities of 'sovereignty' and 'autonomy' should begin with a brief historical overview of their use and meaning (Council of the EU, 2021). It can be said right from the start of our analysis that President Macron's Sorbonne speech was the first serious attempt to use the label 'sovereignty' in a European context. In this sense, European sovereignty is a much newer concept than strategic autonomy (Fiott, 2021, p. 10). In fact, one of the first serious uses of the notion of strategic autonomy emerged in relation to the EU's Space Programme in the early 2000s. Here, the EU decided that it required its own autonomous civilian global positioning,

timing and navigation (GPS) system and the 'Galileo' project was established to wean the EU off of the US' military-controlled GPS. In addition to being the first serious time the concept of 'strategic autonomy' was used, it is also an instructive example of how the concept was translated into policy. In many ways, this case set the scene for current debates about strategic sovereignty in the area of critical and digital technologies.

In the specific case of Galileo, it is not too difficult to understand what strategic autonomy means. To put it bluntly, EU member states did not want to be dependent on the US military for access to, and use of, America's GPS. The US system is ultimately controlled by the Department of Defense, and this means that GPS usage could be subject to political decisions by the US government that may work to the detriment of European interests. Developing an EU alternative implied that the Union wanted political and technological independence from the US in space. This same logic has to some degree been transferred to debates about security and defence. Equally, and not specifically directed at the US, this same logic has permeated European policy in areas such as semiconductors, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the control of raw materials.

Today, most references to strategic autonomy are usually made in the context of transatlantic relations and how Europeans can do more for their own security and defence. In the more specific context of security and defence, we can look to the 1998 French British St Malo Declaration for the first serious attempt in recent history to boost European strategic autonomy. Indeed, the declaration stated that "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" (St Malo Declaration, 1998). It is perhaps noteworthy that 22 years after the St Malo Declaration, European politicians and ministers are still reiterating this same logic (Kramp-Karrenbauer, 2020).

However, if strategic autonomy is defined simply as the capacity to act then it is hard to see why the term should be so divisive. After all, successive US governments have openly called for European states to do and spend more on defence. Of course, the debate is slightly more complicated than this because the idea of autonomy strikes at the heart of the US security guarantee towards Europe. In many minds, autonomy signifies a disruption of US hegemony in Europe and the *status quo* in European security as it has existed since the 1990s. Autonomy also implies that Europe could forego the US guarantee in favour of a European alternative backed by a European hegemon, and for many states Washington is still the preferred hegemon.

Pegged to such arguments is an institutional dimension. For many, talk of European strategic autonomy implies a concentration of efforts in the EU rather than NATO. This aspect of the debate is also an important consideration for the US. Indeed, although Washington has called for a stronger European commitment to defence, it is not willing to entertain greater European autonomy if it means that its defence industry will lose contracts in the EU. There is undoubtedly a strong defence-industrial dimension to debates about strategic autonomy. Again, a number of European states facing direct threats would still prefer to 'buy American' if it ensures the US security guarantee. Indeed, many rail against repeated French calls for strategic autonomy because they claim it is simply a mask to advance French defence-industrial interests.

Such arguments can, of course, be contested. First and foremost, there are questions about the certainty of the US security guarantee to Europe. In fact, during President Trump's tenure there were direct threats to NATO and even the EU was called a foe owing to the Union's trading prowess. In this sense, those calling for the *status quo* in European security can be accused of overlooking the fact that the US is ultimately the arbiter of whether the *status quo* remains or not. No amount of purchases of US defence equipment will be enough to stop Washington taking strategic decisions in its own interest. There is a certain irony to criticisms of strategic autonomy: if repeated calls for autonomy may lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy of a US draw-down in Europe, is the security guarantee really that rock solid? Finally, strategic autonomy is often held up as a threat to European unity because it divides member states, yet such an accusation overlooks all the other ways in which European unity is being eroded (e.g. challenges to the rule of law, the erosion of media pluralism or even the construction of energy pipelines).

Proponents of greater strategic autonomy would argue that the security landscape in and around Europe is under threat, and that the US cannot be relied upon as a cast-iron guarantor of European security. Washington is now focusing on China and it is investing in the Indo-Pacific theatre, and the argument is that the US will have little appetite or even capability to underwrite European security indefinitely—at least if this implies that Europeans do not invest more in their own defence capabilities. Here, much is made of recent affairs such as the retreat from Afghanistan or Australia's decision to turn its back on a commitment to procure French nuclear-powered submarines in favour of an American alternative. Such examples are held up as recent instances in which the US has pursued its own policy ends with little regard for European interests. These examples ring even louder in European ears when seen against the Trump era.

Arriving at a clear definition of strategic autonomy is difficult for the all the reasons outlined above. While it is true that Council Conclusions from November 2013 officially refer to strategic autonomy, the meaning of the term is not entirely clear in the document save for its link with the European defence technological and industrial base and an insistence on the decision-making autonomy of the EU's political bodies (Council of the EU, 2013). Indeed, it may be more profitable to set aside a single definition of the term and instead outline its major uses. It may be better to view strategic autonomy as a spectrum of interpretations broadly falling into three categories: autonomy as *responsibility*, autonomy as *hedging* and autonomy as *emancipation* (Fiott, 2018).

"It may be better to view strategic autonomy as a spectrum of interpretations broadly falling into three categories: autonomy as responsibility, autonomy as hedging and autonomy as emancipation." (Fiott, 2018)

Autonomy as *responsibility* best depicts those states that wish to develop European defence efforts within NATO and to use EU financial and political initiatives in support of this 'European pillar'. Here, autonomy is mainly characterised as a need for greater defence spending and more capacity to act in crisis situations. Under this vision, the transatlantic relationship and NATO are kept intact and even potentially strengthened through EU efforts in security and defence, although dependence on the US still remains high. Autonomy as *hedging* can be depicted as a wariness of the US security guarantee, although European states may not entirely be willing to forego US protection. Again, hedging still assumes a level of dependence on the US although it is more likely that states will seek to develop initiatives within an EU rather than NATO framework. Finally, autonomy as *emancipation* is the most radical variant and it assumes a concerted effort to bolster the EU and substantially lower Europe's security dependence on the US and NATO.

However, for all the controversy surrounding the concept 'strategic autonomy', it is noteworthy or even paradoxical that the EU has perhaps achieved a greater amount of autonomy in areas other than security and defence. Indeed, after 20 years of the Common Security and Defence Policy was launched one may question whether the Union has actually moved closer to achieving a greater capacity or willingness to act. Through the single market, single currency and trade the Union has arguably exerted a greater deal of autonomy than in the area of security or hard power. This is why the so-called 'Brussels effect' has come to mean that the EU's relative autonomy in economic and regulatory policy has bestowed on the Union a high level of relative power (Bradford, 2020; Damro, 2015).

If we accept the notion that strategic autonomy is about achieving greater independence and freedom of action, the term clearly does not only apply to security and defence. Interestingly, even the European Commission's Directorate General for Trade has engaged in defining the term strategic autonomy. Fearing that the notion of autonomy could imply protectionism in the economic sphere, the Commission has set about developing the concept of 'open strategic autonomy'. Although an awkward term, this concept denotes the Union's continued commitment to trade openness but a willingness to defend against unfair or coercive trade practices. As the Commission puts it, "open strategic autonomy means cooperating multilaterally wherever we can, acting autonomously wherever we must" (European Commission, 2021).

The meaning and value of 'sovereignty'

If strategic autonomy rests on a greater capacity to act based on one's own resources and political will, in what ways should we relate it to the idea of 'European sovereignty'? One may fairly ask why the term 'sovereignty' is needed at all to describe a political objective aimed at lowering dependencies. After all, this logic is being played out in calls for more 'technological sovereignty' and 'digital sovereignty' as the EU works to lower dependencies in critical technology areas. The production of semiconductors has become a key plank of the EU's industrial policy. The Union is also investing billions of euros in key strategic technologies such as AI, quantum computing, hydrogen batteries and more.

Use of the term 'autonomy' rather than 'sovereignty' here would certainly be legitimate. Indeed, 'strategic autonomy' can be used as a stand-alone term but one must be careful in not neglecting important political factors that may be embedded in the notion of 'European sovereignty'. Perhaps a useful way of distinguishing between the two terms is to think of 'strategic autonomy' as a form of *political action* and 'European sovereignty' as being grounded in the idea of *political authority*. In this sense, sovereignty still presupposes the need for political action. After all, traditional conceptions of sovereignty also imply a capacity and willingness to act to defend one's interests, citizens and territory—this was the whole point of raising standing armies and armadas.

Political authority can be seen at the core of any understanding of sovereignty. This is not exactly a new or revolutionary point to make. Europe has been marked and scarred by contestations over political authority in the past. Wars were fought and revolutions erupted over the authority of Popes and Monarchs, and then Monarchs and the People. The EU can itself be seen as an institutionalised and legal experiment in managing political authority between people, regions, states and institutions. This is why the notion of 'shared sovereignty' is hardwired into the EU's political functioning. Yet, perhaps it is because of the changing nature of political authority that certain European leaders have felt it necessary to speak of 'European sovereignty'. Is then the use of the word sovereignty a simple short-hand to express a loss of political authority?

A loss or reconfiguration of political authority can certainly be read in President Macron's 'six points' that he outlined at the Sorbonne in 2017. Deteriorating European security, climate change and the digital transition all point in the direction of major challenges that individual European states find difficult to manage alone. Hence the need for supranational authority and institutions. This is by no means a new argument: the notion that Europe somehow rescued the nation-state has a long pedigree (e.g. Milward, 1999). Yet, it is worth interrogating how political authority is being eroded in Europe today. The people and the state are still undeniably important of course, but there are reasons to believe that the relationship between people, states and institutions is being remoulded.

For example, technological advances are challenging political authority and calling into question human agency. The complex algorithms that guide automated systems are beyond the understanding of most people and governments. In particular, AI raises the spectre of humans being taken completely out of decision-making processes. Equally important is that data has become a currency in its own right and humans have in many respects become both producers and consumers of data. Technological advances have always had political effects, of course, but what is different today is that the control of such technologies fall in the hands of only a few global tech firms—does control of data and privacy therefore rest with governments or private firms?

The political authority of tech firms that still largely operate in an under-regulated environment, and beyond EU territory, is one of the key challenges to European sovereignty today. Additionally, the role of these firms and their services raise serious questions about human rights and fundamental freedoms. Social media platforms have been praised and criticised in equal measure for their role in policing who can or cannot use their platforms. There may, for example, be many benefits to silencing former Presidents on social media channels, but should it really be up to private firms to

adjudicate how fundamental freedoms are granted or retracted? The online information space is also raising security fears that cannot easily be met with the traditional tools of state power: the rise of deep fake videos, cryptocurrencies and information manipulation can strike at the heart of any democratic society.

Clearly, the challenges described above cannot completely be captured by the idea of *autonomy* or *political action*. The adoption of law or practices designed to regulate data and tech firms is a form of political action yet doing so requires people, governments and institutions to assert their collective authority. One could also perhaps more cynically suggest that political action thus far aimed at regulating tech firms has not really resulted in an increase in political authority. In some respects, governments may not always have a vested interest in regulating tech firms or social media platforms, as regulation may damage nefarious disinformation business models that rely on the continued existence of an online 'Wild West'. Other governments may feel that regulation may damage the attractiveness of Europe as a location for business. We would also have to acknowledge that some people may prefer the anarchy that comes with unregulated transnational technology and the resulting goods and services to the power of states and governments. Here, personal autonomy and sovereignty would be preferred to state or European sovereignty.

Either way, the notion of sovereignty and political authority is bound up with discussions about ethics, freedoms and democratic life in a way that the term strategic autonomy fails to achieve. Nevertheless, much like strategic autonomy the idea of 'European sovereignty' is contested and indeed challenging for many European states. There are at least three reasons why: first, governments and institutions - purposefully or not - do not make a distinction between autonomy and sovereignty; second, people and governments see sovereignty as a national rather than European affair. European states that have relatively recently regained their national sovereignty may be loath to give life to the idea of a collective European sovereignty; third, critics may argue that when a French president calls for 'European sovereignty', the underlying assumption is that he is actually speaking about French sovereignty.

There is not much one can do about the first two of these three critical arguments. The second factor will certainly need time to evolve, although the countries of Central and Eastern Europe increasingly understand the growing importance of Europe's technological or digital sovereignty (Arak, 2021, p. 43). Automatically pegging the notion of European sovereignty to French interests is an obvious claim to make when the major speech on the topic is delivered by a French President. However, this claim masks the fact that many other European countries are openly supportive of the EU's efforts to invest in critical technology areas or its steps to regulate the digital space. For example, in March 2021 the Netherlands and Spain jointly published a document on their shared understanding strategic autonomy and Germany, Denmark, Estonia and Finland have written to the European Commission to call for steps to boost the EU's digital sovereignty (Politico Europe, 2021).

Indeed, the debate about European sovereignty has at least forced European states to outline visions for how Europe should invest in its own economy and security. There is a growing consensus between European states on the need for technological or digital sovereignty. This has also had the effect of weakening caricatured dichotomies such as 'protectionism vs. openness'.

Indeed, the EU's efforts in regulating data and technologies, plus its policies aimed at ensuring a fairer level playing field in trade, shows that it has largely accepted the need for certain economic safeguards as a basis to sustaining the open global trading system. There also seems to be a growing recognition that investing in strategic technologies and sectors should not be interpreted as protectionism.

Conclusion

Terms such as European sovereignty and strategic autonomy will remain contested and malleable in the future. They are subject to democratic scrutiny and the institutionalised setting of the EU will ensure that no single state can ever impose their interpretation of sovereignty or autonomy on others. In the years and decades to come, Europeans may even drop sovereignty or autonomy in favour of new labels, such as 'European power' or 'European statecraft'. Should Europe become more sovereign or autonomous there may not even be a need to use the terms—does the US or China feel a need to stress its strategic autonomy? Equally true is that the concepts of sovereignty and autonomy will continue to draw out critics that have a vested interest in the status quo of European security. Concepts such as sovereignty and autonomy might encourage critics to interrogate their own assumptions about Europe's position in the world and its traditional alliances.

However, it should be noted that the greatest risk to concepts such as 'European sovereignty' or 'strategic autonomy' is that they are seen as ends in themselves. If the debate about the future of Europe is whittled down to a semantic debate, then this risks turning attention away from questions that require serious answers: first, what does Europe need autonomy or sovereignty for? What precise international objectives is it trying to achieve through political action?; Second, how will Europe achieve greater sovereignty and autonomy? What means are required and do the political class have the political authority to pursue certain goals; third, what dependencies do the EU want to reduce or seek freedom from? Putting the effort into answering these questions is more profitable than a superficial debate about single words.

Policy Recommendations

1. Policymakers and politicians should avoid trying to precisely define the concepts 'strategic autonomy' and 'strategic sovereignty'. In a democratic society, it is healthy that concepts are challenged, re-moulded and clarified.

2. It is important to give the concepts practical meaning by focusing on why strategic sovereignty and autonomy is desirable and how it will be achieved in practice. In this sense, strategic sovereignty and strategic autonomy are means rather than ends.

3. While enhancing the EU's capacity to act is a laudable goal, it is equally necessary to address how political authority is exercised in Europe today. A core task is to maintain the agency of European citizens in light of dramatic social and technological changes.

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Why a Common EU Strategic Culture is Neither Necessary nor Desirable

Payam Ghalehdar

Introduction

Calls for a common strategic culture in Europe have been a staple in recent European Union (EU) foreign policy debates. According to the European Security Strategy of 2003, for example, the EU needed "to develop a strategic culture that fosters early, rapid, and when necessary, robust intervention" (European Council 2003). Taking centre stage during discussions about the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) in the early 2000s and as a direct reaction to the intra-European divide regarding the US-led invasion of Iraq (2003), the quest for a common strategic culture has been with us for nearly two decades, preceding more recent calls for European strategic autonomy. Today, its role in debates about EU foreign policy is no less relevant. Josep Borrell, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, argued in an interview that "you cannot pretend to have a common foreign policy without sharing an understanding of the world, let's call it a common strategic culture" (Borrell 2020). Indeed, ongoing deliberations within the context of the EU Strategic Compass, a two-year long threat assessment started in June 2020, have the explicit goal of helping "strengthen a common European security and defence culture" (EEAS 2021).

As part of the series on the topic of EU strategic autonomy, this policy brief critically assesses ongoing European efforts to move towards a common strategic culture. More specifically, it raises three points of criticism concerning the Strategic Compass, the EU's most recent effort to nurture a common strategic culture for Europe: first, contrary to official statements, a common strategic culture is not necessary for a common European foreign policy. At best, it would be a dispensable appendage to the EU's various national strategic cultures. At worst, its homogenising drive would violate the ingrained pluralism of the EU's body politic. Second, the vision of a common strategic culture underpinning an EU that behaves like a normal power would sit uneasy with the notion of the EU as a civilian power. Finally, for better or worse, creating new strategic cultures is no easy feat. Cultures emerge and change but are rarely created top-down. A common strategic culture might grow organically from strategic autonomy; it is unlikely to precede it.

Instead of trying to forge more strategic cultural homogeneity, the EU should refocus on its strengths as a civilian power. While the European level would embody the identity of the EU as a pluralistic entity based on the rule of law, giving the Union a distinct character in the international system, power capabilities could still accrue at the member-state level. In what follows, this policy brief first looks at the term 'strategic culture', turns to differences in national strategic cultures in the EU, and finally lays out the three points of criticism in greater detail.

"Forging new strategic cultures takes considerable time. Perspectives on the goals and means of external behaviour cannot be changed overnight."

Strategic Culture in the European Union

Strategic culture is a widely used buzzword in the context EU foreign policy. The term itself first emerged in the early 1980s, when scholars debated the cultural predispositions of Soviet nuclear strategy (Johnston 1995, 32). Despite sustained use, however, there is no consensus on the meaning of strategic culture. While definitions of what the term means abound, two general observations are of immediate importance to discussions about the prospects of a common European strategic culture. First, according to most definitions, strategic cultures are the product of an amalgam of historically rooted, deep-seated convictions about the purpose and means of a group's external actions, mostly in the formative years of that group. Because they extend from the past into the present, strategic cultures are sticky. In fact, claiming that strategic culture has a discernible bearing upon external behaviour carries with it scepticism towards a state's quick adaptation to changing external circumstances. If states were fully responsive to externally generated changes, swift, for example, in reacting to power shifts, their behaviour could hardly be a product of the inertia of their historically grown national styles.

The stickiness of culture has two inconvenient implications for the current debate about the promise of a common European strategic culture. For starters, forging new strategic cultures takes considerable time. Perspectives on the goals and means of external behaviour cannot be changed overnight. In fact, it is not even clear whether they can be wilfully transformed at all. Past shifts in strategic cultures have been generated by a wealth of different factors, among which top-down processes are few and far between. Secondly, even if forging new strategic cultures were an easy feat, it is not clear how a European strategic culture would better equip the EU's external mission. Manoeuvrability in the face of a dynamic global environment is by no means implied by culturally motivated strategic preferences. Because strategic cultures constrain at least just as much as they facilitate, a newfound consensus on threats to and opportunities for the EU in its external environment would create a new equilibrium of limited responsiveness to changing circumstances.

The second observation that is relevant to discussions about European strategic culture concerns the nature of actors. While the concept of strategic culture can be applied to a host of various actors, it is noteworthy that its standard use outside the current context is in relation to state actors (US strategic culture, French strategic culture, German strategic culture etc.). Standard definitions of the term point to the importance of the national context, national histories, and national

experiences forged in victories and defeats, both on and off the battlefield. While not rendering strategic cultures beyond the state impossible, this reality provides a cautionary note regarding the European quest to create a common strategic culture beyond member states. By putting the current debate into perspective, these two observations help contextualise the prospects for a common strategic culture in Europe and render visible the weight of its ambitions.

National Strategic Cultures in the European Union

The novelty of creating a strategic culture for an entity beyond the state level draws attention to the current state of national strategic cultures in EU member states. Debates about differences at the member state level commonly revolve around national predispositions towards the use of military force. While the proclivity of individual states to engage in military missions is by no means the only aspect of strategic culture, it is a crucial dimension worth assessing, not least because there is a wide variety of different attitudes across EU member states. Among them, Finland and Ireland exhibit two of the most restrictive understandings of the conditions under which military force is considered to be a legitimate tool of statecraft, virtually ruling out all possible scenarios other than self-defence against territorial attacks. In addition, unlike most EU member states, neither of the two countries is a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which facilitates abstention from collective operations. At the other end of the spectrum, France exhibits the most permissive attitude towards the use of military force. Beyond self-defence, French strategic culture treats military force as a legitimate tool to advance French interests abroad, even when used unilaterally (Meyer 2005, 530-531). Other EU member states sit between these poles. Germany, for example, rules out the unilateral use of force and prefers to stay away from combat missions, but has contributed to several NATO and EU operations, most notably in Afghanistan and Mali.

The second dimension along which national strategic cultures in EU member states differ is threat perception. In predisposing states to concrete strategic preferences, national strategic cultures define foreign threats and identify ways to deal with them. In principle, there is considerable variation in the definition of threats because there is no objective way to determine them. Threats can stem from a set of varying sources ranging from objective military capabilities and geography to historically grown images of a state's external environment. In practice, three issues exemplify the broad variation in threat perception across EU member states—terrorism, Russia, and China. First, there is no EU-wide agreement on the severity of threats emanating from global terrorism. France, exceptionally hard struck by terrorist attacks perpetrated by the Islamic State (ISIS) in 2015 and 2016, considers Jihadi terrorism as a prime threat to its national security. In German discourse, terrorism is an equally serious security threat, but more specifically viewed through the context of migration. While all member states mention terrorism as a major security threat in their national security strategies (ISS 2020, 6), those that have not been the target of terrorist groups tend to relegate terrorism from the list of prime national security issues.

Similar variation in threat perceptions can be observed when it comes to Russia. For most EU member states, relations with Russia have continuously worsened since the Russo-Georgian War (2008) and, more significantly, the Russian annexation of Crimea (2014). In addition, growing

repression and authoritarianism within Russia and its support for anti-system forces within EU member states have increased the tendency in European capitals to consider Russia not only as a purely military threat, but also as a threat to the domestic constitution of the Union. Yet, beneath the growing scepticism towards Russia, there are important differences in attitudes towards it. Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland consider the country a major security threat. Historical experiences ingrained in these countries' strategic outlook, rather than mere geographic proximity, shape their attitudes towards Russia. Finland, which shares a longer land border with Russia than all the four aforementioned states combined, does not identify Russia as a major threat to its national security. While wariness at recent Russian behaviour has increased in Helsinki, Finland continues to view Russia through the prism of both military challenges and economic opportunities. A similar approach can be witnessed in Germany. Having been a driving force behind EU sanctions against Russia since 2014 (European Council 2021), Berlin has not lost sight of its own economic interests. As Nord Stream 2 shows, a gas pipeline project that has put Germany at odds with its eastern neighbours and the US, Russia continues to play an integral part in German energy imports. France has been shown to be even more accommodating to Russia under the leadership of President Emanuel Macron. Seeing common ground in the fight against Jihadi terrorism, Paris views Russia as a potential partner (Reuters 2017).

Finally, differences in threat perceptions extend to another global power: China. Despite increasing pressure from the US to take sides in the growing power competition between the two largest economies of the world, most EU member states have not stopped viewing China through the prism of economic opportunities. With projects like the Belt and Road Initiative and, more specifically, the investment initiative specifically targeted at central and eastern European states involving 11 EU member states (Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries, also called 17+1), Chinese strategy caters to European demands for economic cooperation. The ambivalence of greater economic engagement with China was revealed by Lithuania's decision to leave the format in early 2021, explained by the country's foreign minister as a reaction to Chinese attempts to take over strategic infrastructure in Europe, and sold as an attempt to put the EU on a track of greater unity vis-à-vis China (Politico 2021). Indeed, despite an EU-wide acknowledgment of opportunities in terms of trade and investment, the strategic outlook of EU member states is far from united when it comes to China. France, for example, regards China's role in the international order with increasing scepticism. Despite cooperation on several fronts, including climate change (e.g. the Paris agreement) and non-proliferation (e.g. the Iran nuclear deal), France has grown wary of China's increasing assertiveness in its own region, particularly with respect to Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the South China Sea.

Apart from differing views regarding the legitimate use of military force and differences in threat perceptions, national strategic cultures in the EU exhibit variation on a third and final dimension—the willingness to delegate elements of their external behaviour to the European level. Irrespective of specific constellations regarding the other two dimensions of strategic cultures, this dimension further complicates the landscape. Particularly when member states treat a certain issue as bearing utmost importance to their national security, there is more reluctance to delegate responsibility for tackling it to the European level. France's Operation Barkhane, an anti-insurgency mission in the Sahel region, is a prime example. On top of French participation in the UN peacekeeping mission (MINUSMA) and EU training mission in Mali (EUTM), France started

Operation Barkhane in 2014 in order to counter the rise of Islamists in Mali and neighbouring countries. While the operation welcomes support from other states—Estonia and Sweden have sent troops to Mali within the mission's framework—the operation remains a French initiative, designed unilaterally in Paris. Even where member states identify common threats, joining a common operation is no foregone conclusion. This has significant implications for the willingness to engage in collective missions and delegate responsibility for core national interests to the European level. All in all, major differences persist in the strategic outlook of EU member states.

Efforts to Forge a Common Strategic Culture and the Strategic Compass

Efforts to homogenise threat perceptions and forge a common strategic culture have had a lengthy history in the EU. Ever since the gradual incorporation of the Western European Union (WEU) into the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in the early 2000s, the purpose of institutional innovation and the creation of military capabilities was exactly that. The 'Headline Goals' of creating a force of 60,000 European troops by 2003, deployable within 60 days, which was set during the Helsinki European Council meeting in December 1999, and the creation of several committees like the Political and Security Committee (PSC) and the European Union Military Staff (EUMS), for example, all served the purpose of establishing a defence culture at the EU level (Andreani 2000, 83). The most recent attempt to forge a European strategic culture is the Strategic Compass. Initiated in 2020, the endeavour is a two-year process that includes a joint threat analysis and strategic dialogues about the goals of European foreign policy. The Strategic Compass includes four interrelated core issues, i.e. crisis management, resilience, capacity building, and partnerships (EEAS 2021). Following the EU's Global Strategy of 2016 (EEAS 2016), it aims at refining strategic goals and attempts to operationalise European strategic autonomy.

Recent efforts to build an EU strategic culture should be critically assessed. First, the basic assumption of such an endeavour, best evidenced by the Strategic Compass and similar past efforts, that nurturing a common strategic culture is necessary for the proper functioning of EU security and defence policy, seems plausible at first glance. After all, great powers and influential states around the world and throughout history have had national strategic cultures that have impacted their articulation and pursuit of strategic interests. Yet, the fundamental difference with the EU is that the pursuit of a common strategic culture is situated at a level beyond and above the state level. This raises questions that have not been sufficiently addressed by the EU and, particularly, the Strategic Compass.

In principle, there are two alternative paths to take in the quest for a common strategic culture, both of which come with their own perils and inadequacies. The first option, ambitious and bold in its logic, would aim for a harmonisation and homogenisation of EU member states' diverging national strategic cultures. In effect, this path would produce a single new strategic culture, the referent of which would not be the nationals of any given member state, but the EU citizenry as a whole. Within the framework of the CSDP and its intergovernmental nature, this option is unlikely to receive a friendly welcome from all EU member states. But even if it were a realistic option, there are considerable doubts about whether it would reflect the spirit of the Union and its emphasis on diversity from within, best captured by its official motto: *'In varietate concordia'*.

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The second option is no less problematic. As opposed to the first path of homogenisation, this alternative acknowledges the integrity of national strategic cultures and treats the quest for a common strategic outlook rather as a second layer on top of the outlooks of EU member states. While this option is more practicable and more in line with the diverse complexion of the Union, it raises the question of what exactly the extra layer of strategic culture at the European level should contain if EU member states keep their prerogatives to individually define national security goals, means, threats, and opportunities. What would be left for the European level to take up would be a host of security issues of secondary importance? Within the logic of this path, the quest for a common strategic culture could be questioned altogether. Concerned with softer security issues, that is wider security issues that do not involve the use of military force like the fight against pandemics and climate change, no strategic culture would be necessary for an effective and functioning execution of common initiatives at the European level. The popular assumption among European elites about the relationship between strategic culture and effective foreign policy action is, in reality, far from self-evident. For now, it remains unclear which of the two paths the Strategic Compass will adopt. To make the initiative more effective, more reflection on the relationship between a European strategic culture and national strategic cultures is needed.

Second, apart from unresolved questions about the necessity of an EU strategic culture for the effectiveness of European foreign policy, it is unclear what the actual nature of it should be. To be fair, the process is still ongoing, and the Strategic Compass has not been adopted yet. Emerging discussions surrounding its impending conclusion, however, point to the lack of a rigorous debate about what role the EU wants to play in the world. As with prior efforts to strengthen EU foreign policymaking, the baseline assumption seems to be that a focus on capabilities is key in creating more effective policy outputs within the realm of security and defence policy. Especially military capabilities in the area of crisis management point to the assumed relationship between strategic culture and the use of force (ISS 2021). The purpose of strategic culture, however, is not necessarily to provide a strategic underpinning for military operations and missions abroad and to make the use of military means more acceptable across EU member states. Just like some national strategic cultures within the EU have a very restrictive understanding of when military force can be legitimately used, it is not self-evident that an EU strategic culture would need to be permissive when it comes to military force. What is therefore needed is a sustained debate about the identity of European foreign policy alongside the current debate about capabilities, the latter being seemingly the preferred focus of the Strategic Compass.

A debate about what type of external actor the EU wants to be is all the more relevant against the backdrop of a gradual, yet little discussed shift from the notion of Europe as a civilian power to more recent calls for Europe to become a normal power among other great powers like the US and China. Formerly, EU policymakers prided themselves by insisting that the European way of foreign policy was markedly different from the foreign policy conduct of other powers. Comparisons between the US and Europe that stressed the different strategic outlooks of the two were popular in the early 2000s, with one author claiming that "Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus" and arguing that the two fundamentally differed on the role of military power in foreign policy (Kagan 2003, 3). Nowadays, in the context of the debate about European strategic autonomy, aspirations to the civilian nature of European foreign policy are fading. Instead, strategic autonomy is regarded as a goal that would enable the EU to compete with other powers in a growingly competitive international environment. For that to be possible, forcible means of power are willingly embraced rather than shunned by advocates of strategic autonomy. This raises the question of whether the EU can remain a civilian power and, at the same time, gain more hard power capabilities. Without a more rigorous debate, we will not find out.

Finally, irrespective of whether a common strategy is necessary and what its basic character should be, the generally assumed way to forge a common culture is far from self-evident. According to the sequencing inherent in the Strategic Compass, a new strategic culture emerges from a preceding agreement on the identity of the threats the EU is facing. In the process of nurturing a new common strategy, institutional innovations and dynamics of socialisation are considered important factors. Only after this process is completed can a strategic culture emerge and put EU foreign policy on a stronger footing. In most of history, however, strategic cultures emerged through an uncoordinated process and were shaped by uncontrollable external shocks. French strategic culture with its emphasis on self-sufficiency, autonomy, and nuclear capabilities, for example, is a direct consequence of the tragic lessons of World War II. Cultures emerge but are hard to create. Top-down forging of strategic cultures has been the exception rather than the rule. What is more, if the sequencing formula underlying the Strategic Compass carried any promise, the EU would already have a common strategic culture. Past efforts followed the same logic of cultural engineering and did not produce the desired results.

"Cultures emerge but are hard to create."

Conclusion

The goal of the Strategic Compass is to create a common strategic culture for the European Union. That strategic culture shall then underpin the European quest for strategic autonomy. As this assessment shows, however, it is far from certain whether efforts at identifying common threats that all EU member states face can produce such desired results. National strategic cultures differ across the EU regarding major threats to national security, the permissibility of the use force, and the willingness to delegate authority and responsibility for tackling identified threats to the European level. Moreover, the assumed necessity of a common strategic culture is questionable. If understood as a homogenising exercise, a common strategic culture would run against the very identity of the EU as constituted by diversity. If understood as an extra layer above national strategic cultures that deals with softer security issues beyond the use of military force, it remains unclear why an endeavour as ambitious as nurturing a new culture would be necessary. What is equally lacking is a rigorous debate about what type of actor the EU wants to be in the world. Here, the tension lies between older conceptions of the EU as a civilian power and the more recent push for becoming a 'normal' power able to compete with other great powers. Finally, forging a new strategic culture through the identification of threats is a historically novel undertaking that runs the risk of underestimating the inherent difficulties in creating a new culture. As such, EU foreign policymakers would be well-advised to tone down their grandiose rhetoric about the ultimate goals of the Strategic Compass and its quest for forging a common strategic culture in Europe. Instead, the EU should refocus attention on its neglected character as a civilian power and see its multi-layered setup as an asset, not a liability.

Policy Recommendations

1. Because common strategic cultures are hard to forge, the Strategic Compass should avoid creating expectations it is unlikely to meet.

2. EU foreign policymakers should think hard about the compatibility of a new strategic culture for the EU with its foreign policy identity as a civilian power.

3. Instead of aiming for more homogenisation, the EU should preserve the diversity of its strategic cultures and consider its multi-layered architecture in the realm of EU foreign and security policy an asset rather than a liability.

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Disruption Ahead?
European Strategic Autonomy and
Future Technology

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Introduction

The question of the European Union's (EU) identity has once again entered the limelight of political debates. In a context of rising great-power rivalry between the United States (US) and China, fast-paced technological advances, the growing weaponization of trade policies, also exacerbated by the socio-economic fallouts of the Covid-19 pandemic, Europe finds itself at a crossroads. Going forward, the EU will need to navigate a less predictable emerging world order, re-calibrate the transatlantic strategic partnership with the US, and face major internal and external constraints. With international alliances shifting and traditional forms of cooperation unlikely to keep pace with current geopolitical and technological transformations, there has been a growing realisation in high-level European political and policy circles that the EU will have to do more to maintain its economic power and technological independence, and forge its own destiny in defence matters. To explore such challenges, this policy brief first examines the origins of strategic autonomy in EU defence industrial and technological initiatives; then it traces the dual-use connection between strategic autonomy and discussions surrounding technological sovereignty; and finally, it zooms in on the EU's level of ambition concerning tech innovation and industrial strategies. The brief argues that to achieve any kind of strategic autonomy and tech sovereignty, EU leaders and member states should put forward a credible European industrial and technological strategy across civil and military domains in key tech sectors. This should be matched by substantial European funding and EU action to foster an innovation-friendly ecosystem when it comes to emerging technologies. Accordingly, a common strategic mindset between member states and EU institutions is also needed to connect political and policy thinking with market-driven defence, tech, and digital capability-building priorities at the EU level.

Geopolitics and European Identity

Geopolitics is making a big comeback in European identity construction. What is surprising though for the EU is the choice not to respond to such challenges in the typical EU soft civilian power fashion, but rather to proactively use the concept of strategic autonomy as a doctrinal framework for building the EU's hard military power. This has the potential to undermine the premises of the EU integration process, both as an exclusive peace project and as a challenger to the Westphalian state system. In recent years, the state-centric notions of 'strategic autonomy', and its buzzworthy conceptual spin-offs like 'European sovereignty' in defence, 'strategic sovereignty', and 'technological and digital sovereignty', 'open strategic autonomy', 'data sovereignty', 'semiconductor sovereignty' (Csernatoni 2021a), have been increasingly used in relation to EU-led

policy and institutional initiatives aimed at reducing critical industrial and tech dependencies. These terms encompass an entire menagerie of policy fields, initiatives, and processes under various EU institutions and agencies.

Such framings gather a set of ambitious EU strategies to forge more European independence in defence, strengthen military capabilities, and boost technological and digital innovation power. To stay ahead of the geopolitical game, the argument is that 'more EU' is required in key strategic areas, from home-grown security and defence capability build-up, space, and digitalisation, to the research and development (R&D) of emerging and disruptive technologies (EDTs). Hence, the term strategic autonomy has gained both the political force and the constructive ambiguity to potentially inject a new defence momentum in the European political project (Csernatoni 2020). Initially, this was done solely via a security and defence prism, namely pushing for deepened defence technological and industrial cooperation between EU member states and the EU-level. Noteworthy is the fact that the *Realpolitik* rationale behind the concept, initially born out of discussions whether the bloc should enhance its capacity to act more independently in security and defence, has 'travelled' to other EU policy fields, including tech.

The Origins of Strategic Autonomy in Defence Industrial and Technological Build-Up

Conceptual and political discussions about strategic autonomy have a long and contested history, typically seen as a necessary condition for safeguarding a state's security and attaining its national interests. Its deep roots can be traced to French strategic culture and thinking and going back to the 1950s and the era of De Gaulle, who linked the concept to Franco-American relations and the pursuing of autonomous French weaponry development. A more Europeanised form was mentioned in the French White Paper on Defence (1994), urging European countries to take back control of they own strategic autonomy and security. It also identified the Union as the future for French strategic autonomy. President Emmanuel Macron has been advocating for years the need for European strategic autonomy and sovereignty, and the need to strengthen Europe's defence industrial and technological independence. This has prompted worries that his 'EU First' approach will translate into a 'France First' one given French defence industrial interests, not to mention fears that it will jeopardise the close links with the US or duplicate NATO efforts when it comes to funding, capabilities, and manpower.

When it comes to the EU, seldom has the term been explicitly defined and its more practical and political implications substantially addressed. But the more complex the global environment, the more EU and member states need clear thinking about European vital interests, foreign policy and security priorities, and defence capability development. Yet, the EU has always been shy of grand strategizing, due to member states calling the shots on foreign policy and security decisions and, above all, because of diverging threat perceptions and interests across the continent. In this regard, the European Council conclusions from December 2013 on 'Defence Matters' (European Council 2013) signified an important shift in the EU member states' strategic vision for setting ambitious capability-development priorities for the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). While less discussion was dedicated to forging a common European strategic

culture and he focus was put on dual-use and civil-military capability building for the CSDP, the conclusions prepared the groundwork for the growing communitarisation of the EU's security and defence policy field.

The EU's strategic roadmap set out in the 2013 conclusions was intimately linked to 'a more integrated, sustained, innovative and competitive defence technological and industrial base (EDTIB) to develop and sustain defence capabilities', which could 'also enhance its strategic autonomy and its ability to act with partners' (European Council 2013, p.8). The conclusions make only one reference to strategic autonomy, but this vision was further taken up in the EU Global Strategy: '*Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe*' in June 2016 (EEAS 2016), the programmatic document credited with putting the concept of 'strategic autonomy' on the EU's foreign and security policy agenda. The Strategy also identified that a 'sustainable, innovative and competitive European defence industry is essential for Europe's strategic autonomy and for a credible CSDP' (p. 45). Thus, a clear link can be established between nurturing European defence technological and industrial interests and strategic autonomy. It is, however, important to note that because member states and strategic partners perceive European strategic autonomy differently, the Global Strategy maintained both conceptual flexibility and ambiguity when referring twice to the notion, by using the wording of an 'appropriate level of ambition and strategic autonomy' (p.9, 19).

What is an appropriate level of ambition for EU action in security and defence?

Initially, this was substantiated in the necessity of upgrading the EU's defence portfolio and crisis management capabilities via the improvement of 'smart' weaponry and the creation of a globally competitive European defence industry and market. For instance, the Commission-led European Defence Fund, (EDF) represents a potential gamechanger when it comes to upgrading the EU's role in defence research and development policy. This supranational instrument marks an important shift in the communitarisation of defence and the consolidation of the Commission's institutional role as a non-traditional defence actor (Csernatoni 2020), accounted for by an increased activism on its part in the defence technological and industrial field, as well as a strong intervention in a sector that was purportedly the exclusive reserve of member states. If successfully operationalised, the EDF is expected to boost more lucrative and joint research and capability-driven investment schemes in defence technologies, including of the future-oriented and disruptive variety, across Europe and to increase the EU's global leadership position in strategic tech sectors.

The EDF and the creation of a new European Commission Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space (DG DEFIS) under the helm of Commissioner for the Internal Market Thierry Breton showcase a new level of ambition to strengthen the EU's security and defence actorness at the supranational level. Such policy and institutional initiatives further consolidate the Commission's agenda-setting role in security and defence industrial and technological matters and offer a political signal that the EU and the Commission should have increased competences to organise the defence industry and market (Csernatoni EFAR). Yet, a market-driven and political economy

approach to military capability build-up is not alone sufficient to answer the harder strategic questions needed to achieve coordinated action among member states in the high politics and intergovernmental fields of foreign, security, and defence policy.

Uncertainty remains about the political will of EU member states to engineer more EU-level security and defence cooperation, what type of global security actor the EU wants to become, how capabilities should be used and against whom or what, how to develop a common strategic culture and threat perception across the continent, and what role the US and NATO should have in the EU's quest for strategic autonomy. To answer such questions, in June 2020, EU defence ministers embarked in an unprecedented two-year process to develop a Strategic Compass, a legal-political agreement for unifying the EU's response in security and defence across the continent. The Compass is also expected to define what kind of security and defence actor the EU would like to become and how to enhance its strategic autonomy under four interconnected rubrics, namely crisis management, resilience, partnerships, and capability development. The latter comprises efforts in technological sovereignty building, as well as to various related defence technological and industrial initiatives such as the EDF, PESCO, and space, cyber and maritime capabilities.

The Dual Use Connection: From Strategic Autonomy to Technological Sovereignty

Strategic autonomy has initially been linked mainly to issues related to the EU's security and defence capability building, and in particular to finding synergies between civilian and military technological and industrial initiatives. This narrow emphasis has been recently extended. In the words of **Josep Borrell,** High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Vice-President of the European Commission, the concept of strategic autonomy is indeed not new, being born in the military realm and for a long time it was limited to issues related to security and defence. But this reduction is now apparently a problem and needs to be widened to new subjects related to economy, technology, and the digital domain. According to HR/VP Borrell, strategic autonomy is also a 'process of political survival' for the EU (EEAS 2020). What is also not new in the EU is the increasing focus on dual-use technology development for both civilian and military purpose. Indeed, the dual-use terminology in relation to defence R&D and so-called 'high technology activity' was first introduced in the Commission's 1996 Communication on 'The Challenges Facing the European Defence-Related Industry, A Contribution for Action at European Level' (EC 1996), which noted:

> '[T]echnological performance is coming to depend increasingly on firms' success in managing the interface between civil and defence technology. They have to become more adept at assimilating civil hardware and software into defence equipment, at organising R&D programmes around dual-use technologies and at transmitting knowledge and expertise across the civil-defence divide. Defence-related companies which operate in both civil and defence markets have an interest and important role to play in exploiting civil-defence synergies.' (EC 1996, p.10)

The above language delineates clear links between defence technology development and civilian high-tech, as well as making the most of civil-military synergies. The 1996 wording could be taken almost verbatim out of the Commission's more recent Action Plan from February 2021, the so-called 'Three-Point Belt Plan' on synergies between civil, defence, and space industries (EC 2021a). The 2021 Commission Action Plan also builds on a civil-defence synergies approach and proposes a more horizontal and cross-domain strategy for enhancing dual-use research, technology development, and the EU's overall innovation power. It aims to establish a structured approach and to create new opportunities for tech innovation synergies among relevant EU-funded civil and military programmes and instruments, especially in the case of emerging and disruptive technologies and the digital domain. Critical technologies are expected to change as new and potentially disruptive technologies emerge. The Action Plan defines critical technologies as relevant across the defence, space, and related civil industries, and as essential to Europe's technological sovereignty by reducing risks of overdependence on external players (p. 8-9).

In the 2021 Action Plan, under the conceptual banner of 'technological sovereignty', the rationale is to enhance the strategic priority of critical technological domains and especially in relation to the capacity-building potential of defence and tech-related EU policy initiatives, programmes, and instruments. Concomitantly, the aim is also to shape a more unified perception in Europe around the imperative to innovate and create a home-grown innovation ecosystem in order for the EU to become a strategically autonomous and technologically sovereign actor, since:

> 'Innovation is at the heart of Europe's efforts to lead the digital transition and strengthen competitiveness. […] Facilitating civilian-space defence cross-fertilisation (spin-ins and spin-offs) will address the current fragmentation of the civil-defence innovation landscape.' (EC 2021a, p.12)

Consequently, from 1996 to 2021, the European Commission's overall framing discourse of dual-use technologies, civil-military synergies, and innovation competitiveness has remained essentially the same. What actually changed is the international landscape of growing Great Power tech rivalry between the US and China, the threats and risks that the EU is facing globally and regionally, and most importantly, the political and institutional windows of opportunity for the EU to pursues a more sustained strategy when it comes to the EU's rise as a defence and technological power (Csernatoni 2021a). In this respect, in her 2019 political guidelines, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen claimed 'it is not too late for Europe to achieve technological sovereignty in some critical technology areas' (Von der Leyen 2019, p.13). The 2021 Commission Action plan identifies key sectors and respective technology areas for EU action and intervention: To name a few, in the electronics and digital sector, several technologies are prioritised, including AI, advanced analytics and big data; cybersecurity and cyber defence technologies; high-performance computing, cloud and data spaces; and quantum technologies (EC 2021a, p. 9). Other strategic technology areas are mentioned, such as advanced and additive manufacturing, nanotechnologies, robotics, semiconductors and microelectronics, space technologies and aeronautics, biotechnologies, and autonomous systems.

The agenda set out in the Action Plan is indeed ambitious, and to operationalise it, the Commission will develop technology roadmaps to 'boost innovation on critical technologies for the defence, space and related civil sectors and stimulate cross-border cooperation using all relevant EU instruments in a synergetic way' (EC 2021a, p. 11). The roadmaps will be informed by a series of assessments made every two years by a newly proposed institutional body within the Commission, the EU Observatory of Critical Technologies, and may feed into the launch of new EU flagship technology projects (EC 2021a, p. 11). The Observatory is yet again an example of efforts to consolidate the Commission's institutional role in order to steer the direction of the civil-military innovation agenda in Europe, by providing 'regular monitoring and analysis of critical technologies, their potential applications, value chains, needed research and testing infrastructure, desired level of EU control over them, and existing gaps and dependencies' (EC 2021a, p.9). Yet, achieving civil-military synergies and creating a competitive European technological innovation ecosystem might be easier said than done. A clear European industrial and market strategy is just as essential.

Innovation and Industrial Strategies: Breaking with the Norm to Achieve Tech Sovereignty

Under the banners of European strategic autonomy and technological sovereignty, bridging the divide between on the one hand civil and defence industrial and technological sectors, and on the other hand between various EU initiatives and more cross-border member states cooperation has become a European security imperative. The stakes could not be higher. The current Commission has started to proactively use the notion of 'sovereignty', derived from discussions on strategic autonomy in security and defence and defence sovereignty to build the political imaginary and make room for EU policy action around concepts such as technological, digital, and data sovereignty (Csernatoni 2021a). This conceptual expansion is indicative of increasing fears that greater autonomy in policy areas other than security and defence is needed to safeguard the EU's economic and strategic interests, European values, and as far as maintaining European ways of life, whatever that might signify in a highly diverse cultural and political context across twenty-seven EU member states.

Undoubtedly, the ideological connection between the need to build European strategic autonomy in defence and overall technological sovereignty with discussions about the Union's very 'political survival' (EEAS 2020), including the protection of 'our values and our culture' (EC 2020a), is highly significant. It introduces a sense of urgency linked to existential threats to the bloc's survival in the geopolitical storm and the tech race between the US and China and their respective major technology companies, especially in the case of frontier technology fields such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) research and innovation. The emergence of technologies so disruptive that they have the potential to give a significant offensive edge to adversaries, overtake existing systems of governance, outpace regulatory efforts, and revolutionise military concepts and dual-use capabilities necessitates a rethinking of how, with what, and by whom European technological sovereignty would be made achievable. A solid European industrial innovation strategy is at the epicentre of the technological sovereignty effort.

For some technology areas, the Commission has used its agenda-setting and convening power to launch Industrial Alliances, such as two newly kick-stated Industrial Alliances on Processors and Semiconductor technologies, and the European Alliance for Industrial Data, Edge and Cloud (EC 2021b). They are aimed at advancing the next generation of microchips and industrial cloud and edge computing technologies in order to provide the EU with increasing sovereign capabilities requires to improve the resilience of European critical digital infrastructures and tech products and services. The Alliances have a clear multi-stakeholder approach, by envisaging the bringing together of EU policy experts, member state representatives, businesses and industries, SMEs, specific value chains, academic and research and technology organisation, innovation actors, trade unions, financial institutions, civil society, and users. They are following in the path of other EU Industrial Alliances in the areas of batteries, raw material, and clean hydrogen (EC 2021b). Hence, industrial pan-European alliances can play a significant role in achieving key EU policy goals via joint action by a variety of vested public and private actors.

In other words, Industrial Alliances are an interesting vehicle for identifying which critical technologies make a decisive contribution to strategic capabilities and thus help operationalise public-private collaborations. The goal is to contribute to home-grown technological innovation ecosystems in key technology areas and to help decide which technologies are of importance to European technological sovereignty, where the risk of dependencies need to be reduced or mitigated, and where 'more EU' would bring value-add in the form of EU-led programmes and instruments to address challenges. The 2021 Commission Action Plan also recognised that to strengthen technological sovereignty, the EU must maintain a strong industrial competence and, where possible, seek leadership in critical technologies (EC 2021a, p.9) across relevant civil (including security), defence and space industries. It is thus relevant to note that both the challenges and opportunities of civil-military research and innovation policies are dependent on cultivating a healthy European innovation system and a coherent EU industrial strategy.

This is significant in that a Commission-led civil-military synergy approach to innovation across relevant industries provides a break from traditional strategies only focusing on specific policy sectors, either civil, defence, digital, or space related. Rather, the emphasis is put on solving cross-domain and cross-border challenges that will require multiple actors to work together in novel ways. The 2020 EU Industrial Strategy (EC 2020b), which first announced the proposal for the Commission 2021 Action Plan on Synergies between civil, defence and space industries (p.14), proposed that 'Europe's strategic autonomy is about reducing dependence on others for things we need the most: critical materials and technologies, food, infrastructure, security and other strategic areas. They also provide Europe's industry with an opportunity to develop its own markets, products and services which boost competitiveness'. In the Strategy's sixteen pages, technological sovereignty is mentioned once in relation to Europe's digital transformation and strategic digital infrastructure such as 5G, cybersecurity, and critical quantum communication infrastructure (p.13), while strategic autonomy is mentioned three times in reference to broader EU efforts towards greater industrial competitiveness and reducing dependencies in critical technology areas (p. 3, 13, 16).

Everything has become strategic for the EU, from space, defence, to civil (including security) industries, and especially in areas where the EU lags behind, such as on cloud, data applications, and AI (p.2, 10, 11). The 2020 Industrial Strategy and the 2021 Action Plan are thus laying the foundations for an EU-led industrial and innovation policy that would have the twin goal of enhancing the EU's global industrial competitiveness and supporting Europe's strategic autonomy (EC 2021a, p. 20). Yet, embedding a spirit of industrial and technological innovation in Europe is easier said than done, given Europe's symptomatic shortcomings in cultivating a home-grown environment for high-tech innovation, a rather slow European industrial and innovation ecosystem, and a high level of fragmentation, duplication, and decline in research and development spending between EU member states. What is more, the absence in Europe of venture capital markets is an obstacle in nurturing the growth of European tech start-ups and their entrepreneurial spirit, as they represent a key link in unlocking investment in cutting-edge technology innovation and in bringing competitive ideas to the market. The 2020 Industrial Strategy also recognised that the global race and the next era of industry 'will increasingly be based on frontier science and mastering deep technologies', located 'where the physical, digital and biological worlds are coming together' (p.10).

"Everything has become strategic for the EU"

Should the EU push for greater autonomy in the technological and digital domains?

Are EU-led industrial solutions and civil-military synergies across industrial sectors enough to make European strategic autonomy and technological sovereignty happen? The problem with such questions is that one ends up with 'yes', 'no', or 'but' types of answers. When it comes to European strategic autonomy in defence, a purely market-based approach to European defence technological and industrial integration is limiting, since military assets ultimately signify one of the most important root-sources of member states' sovereignty. Accordingly, a common strategic mindset between member states is also needed to connect political thinking with capability-building priorities at the EU level. Seeking civil-military synergies and sovereignty in critical industrial and technology areas is also another way ahead. Yet, most importantly, the EU's priorities and actions in putting forward competitive civil-military industrial and technological innovation strategies must solve the conundrum of strategic autonomy and sovereignty-building with "an appropriate level" of openness to partnerships, either with foreign industrial and technological players or with like-minded international partners. Related to this, putting forward a coherent strategy linking

the EU's internal industrial and tech capacity-building initiatives with coordinated external foreign policy action is paramount for building the EU's tech actorness and credibility on the international stage.

In this respect, balancing home-grown initiatives with openness to trade and investment should be a safe bet for the EU, including the promotion of resilience in global and local supply chains in critical technology areas. Overall, recent efforts for Europe to become more strategically autonomous and technologically sovereign can only be positive if they are harmonised and comprehensive, specifically because the impact of emerging and disruptive technologies is inescapable and cuts across many industrial sectors. Overcoming challenges will require leadership at the highest levels of governance and a common and clear European vision, if not strategic culture, to set clear priorities. Europe's big challenge is to bring together and operationalise the different civil-military initiatives and instruments that encompass an intricate and highly complex governance structure. It is comprised of different EU institutions and agencies, EU member states, and commercial actors with diverse interests and priorities. Most of EU action in defence and technological innovation matters is quite recent and the EU has just begun to connect all its financial resources and to start bridging the strategic and policy thinking across various fields and industrial sectors. It is still a work in progress. For the ambition of today to become reality tomorrow, there needs to be more willingness from EU institutions and member states to cooperate across interlinked political, strategic, economic, and technical matters.

Policy Recommendations

1. EU leaders and member states should put forward a credible European industrial and technological strategy across civil and military domains with a view to fostering an innovation-friendly ecosystem in critical dual-use technology areas.

2. A common strategic mindset between member states and EU institutions is needed to connect political and policy thinking with defence and tech capability-building priorities at the EU level.

3. The EU needs to reconcile its quest for technological sovereignty with a commitment to strategic openness, tech alliances, and multilateral cooperation, especially with trusted like-minded partners.

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Europe, Strategic Autonomy and the China Question: A Multitude of Dilemmas

Andrew Cottey

Introduction

The debate on European strategic autonomy that emerged in the early and mid-2010s related primarily to European strategic autonomy vis-à-vis the United States (US), although it also reflected a more general view that Europe—in the form of the European Union (EU)—needed to be an autonomous global actor in its own right. Since then, the debate on European strategic autonomy has become intertwined with Europe's relations with China and what is sometimes viewed as a Europe-US-China strategic triangle. For Europe—both individual states and the EU—the China question and the Europe-US-China strategic triangle now pose major foreign policy challenges.

European China Policy: The New Context

Current European debates on China policy and the Europe-US-China strategic triangle need to be understood in recent historical context. In the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, very extensive economic ties developed between Europe and China, in particular in trade, creating an economic relationship comparable in size to the transatlantic one. Inevitably, this created a situation of mutual economic interdependence, including important elements of European economic dependence on - and potential vulnerability to - China. During this period, the EU also developed what became called a strategic partnership with China, involving a wide range of institutionalised EU-China ties (from annual summits downwards), commitments to a theoretically broad bilateral cooperation agenda and efforts to resolve disputes (over issues such as barriers to European access to the Chinese market) by dialogue (Cottey 2021). From a European perspective, so long as China was a potentially viable partner, economic interdependence and institutionalised bilateral cooperation were relatively unproblematic. European policies towards China largely progressed in parallel to those of the US and other Western states (such as Japan and Australia), with engagement viewed as the best means of encouraging China to be a 'responsible stakeholder' (Zoellick 2005).

Since the early 2010s the strategic dynamics underpinning policies of engagement towards China have changed very significantly. China has become more authoritarian domestically and more assertive internationally, exercising its growing power in ways that were not the case a decade ago. US-China relations have become increasingly confrontational, with some describing the dynamic as a new Cold War. At the same time, the Trump presidency created unprecedented turbulence in transatlantic relations and raised long-term doubts about the US commitment to European security and NATO. Together, these shifts intensified the sense of a triangular Europe-US-China relationship, in which Europe's position—in simple terms, whether Europe will be more closely aligned with the US, with China or pursue a more independent or equidistant approach—is one of the central questions.

European Strategic Autonomy vis-à-vis China

As China's foreign policy became more assertive and Chinese investment in Europe grew in the 2010s, concern increased about the downsides—actual and potential—of increasing economic dependence on China. The shift in European views of China was reflected in the EU's 2016 and 2019 China policy documents, in particular the 2019 document's description of China as 'a cooperation partner with whom the EU has closely aligned objectives, a negotiating partner with whom the EU needs to find a balance of interests, an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance' (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2016, 2019, p1). Today, European views of economic relations with China can be summarised as an uneasy mix of increasing concern about the dangers of dependence on China alongside arguments that the relationship remains broadly beneficial, the interests of particular industries, countries and leaders in maintaining existing economic relations with China, and fears of the risk of a wholesale retreat into protectionism.

China is the EU's largest trade partner, marginally ahead of the US. As of 2020, EU27-China trade amounted to €585,967 million (16.1% of total EU trade), compared to €555,530 million (15.2% of total EU trade) with the US. EU imports from China stood €383,397 million in 2020 (22.4% of total imports), compared to €202,619 million (11.8% of total imports) from the US. EU exports to China totalled €202,570 million in 2020 (10.5% of total exports), compared to €352,911 million to the US (18.3% of total exports) (European Commission 2021). Clearly, this creates a form of European economic dependence on China: were China to cut-off all or significant parts of trade with Europe the impact on the European economy would be very significant and the threat of such a cut-off might provide China with significant leverage over the EU and its member states. As noted above, however, the situation is one of economic *inter*dependence or mutual dependence, meaning that China would also incur very significant costs from any suspension or cut-off of trade, likely deterring it from such a step and reducing the likelihood or credibility of any threat of this type. More substantively, China has a track-record of using economic boycotts against individual European states and other countries, such as Australia and South Korea, which have taken policy positions of which China disapproves (on issues such as human rights, Tibet and the World Health Organisation (WHO) investigation of the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic). While the size of the EU and the scale of EU-China trade may limit the vulnerability of the EU as a whole to Chinese economic pressure, China has long played economic divide and rule against individual European states and this will likely continue.

Chinese economic influence over EU member states already impacts EU foreign policy positions relating to China. EU foreign policy decisions are made on the basis of consensus and in some cases member states where China has particular influence (most notably Greece and Hungary) have vetoed or watered-down common EU positions. In 2016 Greece, Hungary and Croatia opposed stronger language in an EU statement on China's maritime disputes with its neighbours in the South China Sea, resulting in what was generally viewed as a weak EU position (Fallon 2016). In 2017 Greece vetoed a common EU position criticising China at the UN Human Rights Council (Smith, 2017). Such national positions have had the effect of institutionalising weak, lowest common denominator EU positions on various China policy issues.

Since the 2010s Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) in Europe has caused increasing concern in Brussels and national capitals. Chinese FDI in Europe (EU-27 plus the UK) grew very significantly during the 2010s, from relatively low levels in the 2000s (less than €2 billion annually) to a peak of €44 billion in 2016, falling back to €6.5 billion in 2020 (partly as a result of the Covid-19 induced recession, but with the decline beginning before that) (Kratz, Zenglein and Sebastian 2021: 9). There is a general concern that Chinese FDI may give China influence in Europe, as economic and political actors may develop an interest in maintaining such economic ties and avoiding actions which displease China. More specifically, there are concerns about excessive Chinese influence in or control over particular industries, companies or technologies, since most Chinese FDI involves mergers with or acquisitions of European companies. These concerns apply especially to high-technology sectors which are widely viewed as the forefront of future economic development. A further area of concern has been Chinese investment in transport infrastructure (such as ports and rail links) as part of the Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI), where there are again fears of excessive Chinese influence or even control. Finally, there have been specific concerns about 5G mobile telephone networks, where Chinese company Huawei is the leading global provider (and other companies lag behind). Again, two types of concern exist: the general one of possible dependence on a single supplier controlled by China and more specific concerns about possible security weaknesses that may allow the Chinese government to use 5G networks underpinned by Huawei's technology for spying (Rühlig and Björk 2020).

Since the mid-to-late 2010s, there has been growing recognition in Europe of the risks of economic and technological dependence on China and a variety of efforts at the EU and national level to address the issue. The EU's 2019 China policy document included a substantial section relating to the risks of economic and technological dependence on China, in particular "(F)oreign investment in strategic sectors, acquisitions of critical assets, technologies and infrastructure' and 'critical infrastructure, such as 5G networks" (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2019: 9). The document argued for a renewed industrial policy to "foster industrial cross border cooperation, with strong European players, around strategic value chains that are key to EU industrial competitiveness and strategic autonomy", noting the role of the Strategic Forum for Important Projects of Common European Interest, the EU Coordinated Action Plan on Artificial Intelligence and the European battery alliance project. On the European battery alliance project, the document noted that "(P)articular attention is being paid to ensuring a reliable supply of raw materials and access to rare earths" (where China is overwhelming the world's largest supplier of rare earth metals).

European states and the EU have a range of options for reducing economic and technological dependence on China: investment screening mechanisms; diversification of supply and production chains; sector specific arrangements (as in the case of 5G); support for domestic/European technology development and companies; and the radical option of pursuing a more fundamental economic de-coupling from China (by imposing tariffs, limits or even outright bans on imports from China). The EU introduced a new regulation on screening of FDI in 2019-20, although decisions ultimately remain at the national level. In this context, European countries have begun to halt Chinese acquisitions of European companies under national investment screening mechanisms: Germany and Italy, for example, have halted Chinese acquisitions of

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lisation of
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common EU-
China positions
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costs in terms of
the breakdown of
institutional ties
if it antagonises
China."

companies involved in semiconductors, satellite communications, radar, metallurgy and the automotive industry (Kratz, Zenglein and Sebastian 2021: 16). On 5G, a growing number of European states have taken action which will ban or significantly limit Huawei's involvement in the 5G systems: most Central and Eastern European EU member states signed memoranda of understanding with the US during the Trump administration shutting Huawei out of their 5G networks; while Western European states have been more circumscribed in their approaches, most have introduced national frameworks which have or are likely to limit, and possibly entirely shut out, Huawei's involvement in 5G networks (Chivot and Jorge-Ricart 2020, Noyan 2021). Notably, on both investment screening and 5G EU member states have been reluctant to surrender much power to the EU: while EU level frameworks have been put in place, decisions in both areas remain ultimately national ones.

The EU may also have options for reinforcing the political side of foreign policy independence vis-à-vis China. First, the introduction of qualified majority voting (QMV) for EU foreign policy would prevent individual or small numbers of member states from vetoing or watering down collective positions, likely resulting in stronger policy positions on issues such as human rights and the South China Sea. Second, the institutionalisation of EU-China ties has arguably imposed a form of self-binding on the EU, whereby the Union faces political pressure to agree common EU-China positions or risks political costs in terms of the breakdown of institutional ties if it antagonises China. Consideration could be given to the downgrading (or even suspension) of institutionalised cooperation with China in order to avoid this kind of self-binding. Both of these options, however, would involve risks. The introduction of QMV in EU foreign policy decision-making might risk states openly breaking with EU positions they had not supported and possibly a more general fragmentation of EU foreign policy. The downgrading or suspension of institutionalised ties with China would risk cutting off important means of communication, confidence-building and policy coordination.

Within Europe, there is little support for a more radical economic de-coupling from China. A recent report from the EU Chamber of Commerce in China concluded that "the 'nuclear' options of direct confrontation or cutting China off from the US dollar (USD-) backed financial system" were "universally considered unlikely" by European companies engaged in China (European Union Chamber of Commerce in China 2021: 4). The mainstream view is that economic

decoupling from China would cause very significant economic damage and should therefore be avoided—one estimate suggests that unilateral EU economic decoupling from China would reduce real income by 0.8% or a permanent real income loss of €131.4 billion (Felbermayr, Gans, Mahlkow and Sandkamp 2021).

Recalibrating European China Policy

The EU is at the beginning of a process of recalibrating its policy towards China. This is already resulting in efforts to reduce economic and technological dependence on China. How far this will—and should—go remains to be seen and involves significant dilemmas. Diversifying supply chains makes sense in principle, but may involve duplication, inefficiencies and higher costs. Direct EU or member state support for companies or particular industrial sectors or technologies may reduce dependence on foreign suppliers, but risks creating longer term inefficiencies or making companies/sectors dependent on permanent EU/member state subsidies. Downgrading institutionalized ties with China may reduce the risk of the EU binding itself to a search for cooperation with China, but risks removing important frameworks for communication and dialogue.

The debate on economic de-coupling with China is sometimes reduced to a crude choice between a deeply enmeshed status quo or Trump-style protectionism. In fact, steps taken by both China and the EU and its member states in the last few years are already producing a model of "patchwork globalisation" (Kratz, Zenglein and Sebastian 2021). Given the shifts in Chinese domestic politics and foreign policy over the last decade, there is a strong case for Europe to reduce its economic dependence on China, especially as relates to key industrial sectors, advanced technology and infrastructure. This, however, needs to be balanced against maintaining what has been a broadly beneficial mutual economic relationship and the need to maintain dialogue and cooperation with China in other areas, especially climate change. Getting this balance right will be no easy task.

Europe, the United States and the China Question

The picture is further complicated by the new US-China strategic rivalry and the triangular relationship between Europe, the US and China in this context. The intensifying US-China strategic rivalry raises major questions for Europe (both the EU and individual European states): should Europe align itself with US in seeking to counterbalance China? Should Europe pursue a policy of equidistance between the US and China? Are there circumstances in which Europe may find itself closer to China than the US? Can Europe define a policy which is both critical of China, but different from that of the US?

From a strategic autonomy perspective, one argument suggests that without an independent European policy, Europe risks being dragged into Cold War with China by policies driven and shaped by the US. In the worst case, European states could find themselves dragged into a war with China (over Taiwan, the South China Sea or the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands) driven by US

policies. Even short of worst-case scenarios, being drawn into a US-China Cold War on the US side risks seriously damaging cooperation in other areas, in particular climate change, where China's engagement may be vital. This view has been articulated in particular by French President Emmanuel Macron: "A situation to join all together against China, this is a scenario of the highest possible conflictuality. This one, for me, is counterproductive" (Momtaz 2021).

Behind these questions about European strategy are deeper questions about the new US-China strategic rivalry and different answers to these questions suggest different conclusions for Europe policy. One question is what is causing the US-China strategic rivalry or in simple terms, 'who is to blame'? If the answer to this question is primarily shifts in Chinese politics and foreign policy—the increasingly authoritarian turn in Chinese politics and the increasingly forward, even aggressive, Chinese position on a wide range of regional and global issues—then arguably Europe should support the US in pushing back against China. If the US-China strategic rivalry is driven primarily by an exaggerated perception of the 'Chinese threat' in Washington, DC and by unnecessarily provocative US policies, then arguably Europe should seek to distance itself from US policies and maintain an open door for cooperation with China. A second set of questions relate to whether a US (and wider Western) Cold War with China can be avoided or mitigated and how far it is possible to both strategically push back against China and maintain cooperation with Beijing in other areas? If a Cold War with China is avoidable, then policies designed to de-escalate tensions with China might be prioritised. If a Cold War with China is inevitable, then policy attention will shift to how best to conduct that Cold War. If pushing back against China can successfully be combined with cooperating with Beijing then such a policy will be preferably; if the two strategies cannot be combined, then Europe and the US will face some difficult strategic trade-offs. Assessments of the answers to these questions will differ within Europe (in both Brussels and national capitals) and lead to different conclusions about how Europe, especially the EU, should position itself in the new Europe-US-China strategic triangle.

Transatlantic Relations and China: From Trump to Biden

The politics of the Europe-US-China strategic triangle has been quite fast-moving in the last few years, shifting in particular in response to changes in US domestic politics. During the Trump administration, Europe, especially the EU, sometimes seemed closer to China than the US, in particular in terms of shared opposition to the Trump administration's trade tariffs and support for the Paris climate change agreement and the Iran nuclear agreement. At their 2018 summit, the EU and China issued a strong joint statement of support for multilateralism, in particular in relation to trade and climate change (European Union 2018).

In 2021 the Biden administration sought to repair the damage done to transatlantic relations by the Trump administration. A central element of this was efforts to forge a common front against China. At an EU-US summit in June 2021, the two parties agree to "closely consult and cooperate on the full range of issues in the framework of our respective similar multi-faceted approaches to China" and to establish a high-level EU-US Trade and Technology Council (TTC). Although the TTC's agenda is much broader than China, it was clearly envisaged as a framework within which to address economic and technological dependence on China and China's role on in the global

economy. Borrowing from the EU's 2019 China policy document, the statement from the EU-US summit also noted the "elements of cooperation, competition, and systemic rivalry" in both the EU and the US's relationships with China and committed the EU and the US to "coordinate on our constructive engagement with China on issues such as climate change and non-proliferation, and on certain regional issues" (European Union 2021, para. 26)—suggesting an approach shaped also by European concerns rather than Europe simply following the US lead.

The positive dynamic in US-European coordination of policies towards China was disrupted by the announcement of the Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) pact in September 2021, under which the UK and the US agreed to help Australia develop nuclear-powered submarines and the three countries committed to cooperate on security more broadly. Although the agreement did not mention China by name, AUKUS was clearly designed to counter-balance Chinese power. AUKUS overturned a previous agreement with France to help Australia produce conventional submarines and was announced without consultation with France or other European states. French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian described the pact as a "stab in the back" (Charlemagne 2021). AUKUS's announcement as a bolt from the blue only one day before the EU published its own Indo-Pacific strategy, reinforced the sense of US unilateralism.

For France—and to some extent for other EU member states—AUKUS reinforced the arguments for strategic autonomy from the US, especially in relation to China policy and the Indo-Pacific. The EU Indo-Pacific strategy's strong emphasis on cooperation in the region, as opposed to counter-balancing China, only added to the sense of divergent US and European approaches (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2021). Following the furore surrounding AUKUS, the Biden administration sought to calm the diplomatic storm by emphasising the importance of France and the EU as partners in the Indo-Pacific. One suggestion was that Europe might be brought into policy coordination on China and the Indo-Pacific by expanding the Quad (US, India, Japan, Australia) grouping to a Quad-plus-two framework with France and the UK. The longer-term impact of the AUKUS rift, however, remains to be seen.

Stronger Together

Stepping back from short-term diplomatic developments, two broader arguments may be made, both of which suggest that the longer-term dynamic may be towards transatlantic cooperation on China. First, if the issue is autonomy from and influence over China, there is a strong case that Europe and the US will best be able to reduce economic and technological dependence on and exercise influence over China if they work together (and with other democracies such as Japan, Australia and India). China may soon become the world's largest economic power, but the combined economic might of the world's democracies will significantly outweigh that of China, suggesting that the degree of unity or disunity amongst the world's major democracies will have a major bearing on the future direction of geopolitics. If European strategic autonomy in the Indo-Pacific means an approach strongly divergent from that of the US, both Europe and America's position vis-à-vis China may be weakened.

Second, notwithstanding the unilateralist tendencies in US foreign policy, in the medium-term Europe is likely to find that it has much more in common, in terms of both values and interests, with a democratic United States than with communist China. On multilateralism, for example, China's approach is arguably quite different from Europe's, preferring the kind of great power sovereigntism that allows it to exercise a veto and weak commitments that it can ignore or bypass in practice. The case for transatlantic cooperation on China, therefore, is strong. Such cooperation, however, cannot rest simply on Europe following America's lead and will require a willingness to compromise on both sides of the Atlantic.

Finally, the possibilities of a future populist US President and/or a breakdown of democracy in the US cannot be ruled out, in which case Europe could find itself facing a scenario of deeply troubled relations with both China *and* the US. This possibility provides a powerful case for a European hedging strategy of seeking transatlantic cooperation on China while further building European political unity and capabilities.

Conclusion

Europe's strategy of engagement with China—as well as the more narrowly self-interested economic decisions of businesses and governments—have resulted in a relationship of substantial mutual interdependence between Europe and China. Inevitably, this involves dependence on China and gives China leverage over Europe. When China looked like a viable— or potentially viable—partner for Europe this was relatively unproblematic. Today, with China becoming increasingly assertive internationally and increasingly authoritarian domestically, this dependence is problematic and becoming more so almost by the day. In this context, Europe is seeking greater strategic autonomy vis-à-vis China. The difficult questions are exactly how this can and should be achieved and how far it necessitates the dismantling of existing economic and institutional relationships with China. European states and the EU need to find a middle road which reduces economic and technological dependence on China, while maintaining, in so far as possible, broadly beneficial trade relationship and the scope for cooperation with China in other important areas, in particular climate change.

The European China question, furthermore, is now deeply intertwined with Europe's relationship with the US. Differing views of the nature and causes of increasing US-China tensions lead to differing assessments of how Europe should try to position itself in the new US-Europe-China strategic triangle. These, in turn, are intertwined with profound uncertainties about the long-term direction of US domestic politics and foreign policy. This briefing has argued that, ultimately, European states and the EU will find that they have much more in common with the US than they do with communist China and that differences between Europe and the US over China are more likely to be ones of nuance than grand strategy. The case for transatlantic cooperation towards China therefore remains strong. Nonetheless, given the uncertainties about the strategic direction of US foreign policy and domestic politics, Europe is also likely, at least in part, to hedge against the possibility of a more problematic relationship with the US. Balancing transatlantic cooperation vis-à-vis China and hedging against the possibility of a populist authoritarian America are likely to pose on-going challenges for European states and the EU.

Policy Recommendations

1. Europe (both European states and the EU) should seek to reduce economic and technological dependence on China, especially in key sectors and technologies, while maintaining, in so far as possible, an open trade relationship and the possibility of cooperation in other areas, in particular climate change.

2. The EU should review its institutional relations with China in order to assess the utility and value of the current wide-ranging institutional ties.

3. Europe and the US can best maintain their autonomy from, and influence over, China if they work together with one another (and with other democracies). This will require a willingness to compromise on both sides of the Atlantic.Charlemagne (2021) The great sub snub. *The Economist*, 25 September, p25.

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The EU at a Crossroads: Strategic Autonomy as Strategically-Adept Sovereignty

Gerlinde Groitl

Introduction

The European Union is at a crossroads: Either it manages to become a more capable, more self-reliant actor—or it will suffer the consequences in an interdependent, yet ever more antagonistic international system. Though the EU has pledged to pursue "strategic autonomy", its quest encounters multiple conceptual and practical hurdles. Practicalities aside, it is fair to say that the logic of strategic autonomy is an ill-suited approach for the task at hand. This brief looks into the nature of the challenge as well as Europe's available options to counteract international decline. It first reviews the European Union's power and influence in the contemporary global order, before looking into what autonomy can, should and should not mean and delving into what might help build sovereign European agency in dealing with today's challenges.

A happy ending for the EU's quest for self-empowerment is anything but guaranteed. While EU members states do possess significant power resources, they are incapable of translating them into meaningful collective influence at the international level. In a world shaped by great power conflict, systemic rivalry and complex global networks, European weakness is a major impediment. While reform efforts are well under way, talk of strategic autonomy falsely implies that the EU's target should be to become an autonomous actor with independence in the military realm and from the United States. What the EU ought to be aiming for instead is to become a strategically adept actor capable of protecting the sovereignty of its members. This goes beyond the military domain and may be done best in close partnership with Washington. To gain sovereignty as a strategic actor, the EU will have to adopt a new mindset, acknowledging the persistence of zero-sum politics in the world and the need to respond in more muscular, comprehensive, strategic ways; embrace multi-speed integration realities also in the foreign, security and defense realms; and engage in multi-faceted alliance diplomacy. If the EU fails to become a more capable protector of the sovereignty of its members and their citizens, it may lose its relevance or be torn apart along the way.

The Nature of EU power and influence in the contemporary international order

Power and Influence: Capability, Capacity, Potency

Defining the power and influence of the EU in the contemporary international order may appear as a quick, preliminary thought exercise. In reality, it is a difficult endeavor. Power is mostly conceptualised in terms of *capabilities*, that is the sum of power resources a state or other entity possesses. While analysts may differ in the specific selection of variables—including political, economic, military, and societal ones—resource-based assessments provide a transparent, objective way to measure relative power scores and rank states and other entities in power hierarchies. The bad news is that no matter how elaborate and diligent the effort, capabilities alone tell us nothing about their real-life effects.

> "Though EU member states possess a vast set of power resources, they are unable to collectively put them to use in a straight-forward manner."

Power resources and influence are two different things, and the ability to get what one wants is what really counts. The way resources are put to use is the domain of politics and strategy. In this sense, actor *capacity* to produce and implement timely and fitting policies plays a key role. The policy process, its structures, and procedures can make or break international prowess: The shape and quality of the decision-making processes, the level of coherence, consensus or fracture, the polity and politics side of the equation define policy outputs—and hence how the potentially available assets can be brought to bear in political practice.

This two-step approach of defining actor *capability* and *capacity* must yet again be complemented with an interactional view to determine whether policies produce desired international outcomes. Hence, the *status quo* global order must be factored in. It is a truism that the severity of a political problem depends not only on the problem as such, but on the available means to solve it. The same goes for tallies of political power: Influence hinges not only on unit-level power assets and their operationalisation, but also on the external environment. Only if the EU has the right tools and policy options for the challenges it faces does it possesses the necessary *potency* to have its way.

The EU as a Pawn in an Antagonistic World?

Assessing the EU's power and influence in terms of capabilities, capacity and potency, the unfortunate conclusion is that the EU is squeezed between a rock and a hard place. Though EU member states possess a vast set of power resources, they are unable to collectively put them to use in a straight-forward manner. In global comparison, the EU is

among the three major economic and trading powers in league with the US and China. With a GDP of around $15.2 trillion it ranked behind only the United States with its close to $21 trillion USD and ahead of China's $14.7 trillion in 2020 (World Bank 2021a). Its share of global trade in goods and services amounted to 16.8% in 2020, ahead of both China's 14.7% and the US's 13.6% (European Commission 2021a). Military spending of individual EU members states added up to around $232.9 billion in 2020, way ahead of Russia's $61.7 billion and surpassed only by China's $252.3 billion and the US's $778.2 billion (World Bank 2021b). In terms of OECD official development assistance, EU funds (of member states and EU institutions) amounted to 46% of the global total in 2020 (European Commission 2021b). On top of this, normative and soft-power attractiveness have traditionally added significant persuasive and seductive power to the EU's capabilities as immaterial resources, as post-Cold War transformation processes in Central and Eastern Europe have exemplified.

Impressive as this record may be, cautionary notes are warranted. First, the balance of capabilities within the EU is highly asymmetric. Whether in the political, economic, innovative, military or aid domains, the EU-27's collective strengths primarily rest upon few select shoulders. Second, Brexit significantly reduced the EU's standing on all counts, even if the UK remains a core partner. Third, current global trends see the EU on a downward trajectory in a broader sense. This is particularly noteworthy in the economic realm, which is widely viewed as the EU's strongest arm. But in terms of GDP and growth, the EU has been losing ground against the US, China and others since the financial and follow-on crises in the late 2000s (World Bank 2021a). In addition, Europe is trailing behind in artificial intelligence (AI) and the wider tech and cyber realms. Since technological revolutions will continue to transform political, economic and social life at home as well as inter-state relations and power balances abroad, these trends are disconcerting. Generally speaking, the relative decline of the West in the global distribution of capabilities has more to do with European than American weakness, and this will likely accelerate in the future.

Capability developments aside, the EU's (lack of) capacity in foreign and security affairs makes it punch below its potential weight. First, despite pronouncements of shared EU interests and values, perceptions as well as assessments of policy priorities and preferred solutions vary widely among member states. The EU-27 simply do not possess a natural strategic consensus. Making matters worse is that even some of the most basic principles and norms have become contested, as Poland's or Hungary's assaults on the rule of law and their ongoing tug-of-war with Brussels demonstrate. Such foundational chasms threaten the essence

"Though it talks the talk of self-empowerment in foreign and security policy, the EU has yet to walk the walk."

"Either the
EU finds
new ways to
leverage
 influence in
the status quo
international
order and
become a
strategically
adept sovereign
actor in it—
or Europeans
run the risk of
turning from
player to pawn
on the global
chessboard."

and functionality of the EU, potentially even its current existence. Second, intergovernmental processes with wide ranging consensus requirements in the foreign, security and defense sectors too often result in gridlock or painstakingly slow decision making and action. Third, national duplication, waste and non-complementarity prevent the EU-27 from combining national defense assets effectively. Fourth, due to structural and ideational constraints, external action tends to be shaped by internal logics above external demands. Too often, the EU's policy output is self-referentially focused on what works for Brussels (e.g. a focus on integration, negotiations and dialogue as ends in themselves) or, as in the case of PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation), on member state preferences and comfort zones. Though it talks the talk of self-empowerment in foreign and security policy, the EU has yet to walk the walk.

If Europe enjoyed a largely benign external environment, these deficits would not matter much. In reality, they are critical. First, great power politics and systemic rivalry is back on the international agenda and the EU is not up to the game. Russian and Chinese revisionist policies question the most essential ground rules the European project rests upon, namely that the international order was rules-based, liberal, inclusive and operated on a technocratic logic of institutionalised global governance. Moscow and Beijing bring back ruthless great power revanchism, the salience of coercive and military power and sphere-of-influence thinking, while growing tensions render established institutions defunct. Second, systemic rivalry between democracy and autocracy, and between free-market economics and state capitalism, creates new dividing lines, challenging the Western model of development worldwide. Third, globalisation, technological advances and the realities of complex interdependence force both nation states and the EU to deal with an ever-growing, ever more complex array of networked challenges (e.g. cyber, disinformation, climate, global health, migration) they must manage but cannot resolve. Fourth, the EU cannot outsource foreign and security policy to others, like the US, any longer. In sum: Either the EU finds new ways to leverage influence in the *status quo* international order and become a strategically adept sovereign actor in it—or Europeans run the risk of turning from player to pawn on the global chessboard.

Autonomy vs. Sovereignty Under Interdependence

The EU's pledge to build strategic autonomy can be read as a chiffre for the desire to take control of its own fate. The way it has been framed and widely understood, however, raises more questions than it answers. Indeed, the language of strategic autonomy leads to a slippery slope of misconceptions. "Autonomy" may be easily misunderstood as a quest

for "autarky", which would be doomed to fail under the conditions of networked interdependence. "Strategic" may seduce some to believe that the need for self-empowerment was limited to the military realm and commitment to integrated military structures would do the trick. In other quarters, "strategic autonomy" is primarily interpreted as the need to gain independence *from* the US, suggesting that Europe would be better off as an "independent pole" and that this was a simple policy choice. It is misguided. The EU must empower itself to be able to defend its interests and its values. In many instances this will best be done in close partnership *with* the US and others.

Overall, the debate on strategic autonomy is too narrow in its focus and too simplistic regarding the cure. Instead of revolving around a changing transatlantic partnership and European shortcomings in the defense sector, the analysis has to begin with the foundational qualities of today's globalised world. Interdependence was once understood as a means to civilise and pacify international affairs. A world characterised by complex interdependence, the argument went, would incentivise inter-state cooperation and compromise. An ever-denser network of institutions would help solve collective action problems and channel multilateral governance needs into reliable structures, which operate largely independent of power shifts. Unfortunately, these assumptions turned out to be false. On the one hand, globalisation and interdependence do not tame great power competition and other inter-state conflicts. Revisionist states as well as those supporting the *status quo* now shed their prior restraint, tolerate costs, use and abuse interdependence for power political ends, engage in hybrid- and grey-zone conflicts, and ponder decoupling options as economics become ever-more securitised. On the other hand, global governance optimists ignored the tensions interdependence creates for sovereign national and democratic governance, which have become self-evident by now. This is the world the EU has to find answers for.

So what should the EU aim for to build its influence as a shaper of its external environment? Strategic autonomy clouds our thinking. Though it is not envisioned as such, autonomy in the real sense of the word suggests a situation where actors exist and operate untouched by others. Yet a billiard-ball model of autonomous actors, detached and unconnected from one another, is an illusion. Cutting ties in a very general sense would cost dearly, threaten the well-being of EU members and be thoroughly alien to open societies. Even if one tried to roll-back globalisation and networks of interdependence, it would be doomed to fail. Some drivers of globality are irreversible. Trade flows rest on policy choices, they can be interrupted, albeit at high

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political costs. Yet advancements in technology, communication, mobility and else are here to stay. In short, if cross-border interdependence is a given, autonomy cannot be a plausible blueprint for action. The qualifier that the EU was only looking for autonomy in the "strategic" sphere (as the ability to put military force to use independently) does not rehabilitate the concept either. It implies flawed siloed thinking—separating the military from the political, the economic and other realms—even though security and other challenges must be addressed with an all-of-government approach. On top, it misleadingly suggests that a go-it-alone attitude is an asset. To illustrate the defects with a hypothetical: If the EU set up a functional, well-equipped European Army tomorrow, allowing it to flex military muscle instantaneously and autonomously—would European interests and values be better secured against Russia, China and the frictions of a globalised world? The obvious answer is no.

What the EU ought to be aiming for is to empower itself to become the strategically adept protector of the sovereignty of its members and their citizens. No EU member state, not even the most powerful one, can hope to fend for itself in today's environment: Divided as a union or out on their own, European states will be relegated to the position of rule-takers in a changing international order. Of course, sovereignty can never be absolute in an interconnected world with geopolitical frontlines. States and entities like the EU will never have the luxury to simply decide they want to remain unaffected from any global problem of the day. But they do have opportunities to reduce their own vulnerabilities, build their own capability, capacity and potency and maximise own sovereign leverage even under the conditions of interdependence. Focusing on German foreign and security, Christian Mölling und Daniela Schwarzer utilised the catchphrase "smart sovereignty" to make this point (Mölling and Schwarzer 2021). Since you cannot escape the realities of the messy world, it is imperative to prudently embrace and shape it, separate the existential from the nice-to-have, prioritise, invest in your own strengths and work within the confines of the possible. To do so takes strategic competence, meaning not, first and foremost, military strength, but the ability to relate political ends to ways and means. Only if the EU can empower itself to secure favorable outcomes on behalf of its members will it remain relevant and become the sovereign strategic actor it ought to be.

EU's external power projection and implications for other institutions

How can the EU improve its strategic power projection and sovereignty? It would be easy to put together a long wish list of what is needed, including more integration on all fronts, a solid strategic consensus, more and better capabilities, streamlined decision making and policy implementation, knowledge in the art of geopolitical hardball, and a revamped EU with military great power potentials. It would not be the EU as we know it, and chances are slim that it ever gets there. EU self-empowerment must work from where we are today. The baseline thereof is that individual members are incapable of protecting their own political, economic and societal well-being against the cold chills of international disorder. The EU must be conceived as a protective shield for its members, set up in a more determined manner, yet brought to use in more flexible ways.

First: Europe must cultivate a new mindset for itself and its role in the world to strengthen its ability to exert sovereignty in a strategic way. The functional logic of the EU, the "Brussels method", implies that conflicts can always be resolved through negotiation, patience, compromise. While it is tried and tested within, this penchant for engagement, dialogue and accommodation turns into a liability when it meets determined revisionists without who seek to undermine democracy, thwart Western unity and elicit policies of appeasement. The EU must learn to live with rivalry, manage it and apply its own persuasive and coercive powers in more determined ways. In dealing with its external environment the EU had long practiced a form of unconscious hegemony—projecting transformative power into its neighborhood with its consensual and incentive-driven policy of engagement and enlargement—before it resorted to a defensive posture of building its own 'resilience' in recent years. Yet persuasive power without and resilience within are neither mutually exclusive nor sufficient: the EU must acknowledge the continued existence of zero-sum-game dynamics and incorporate a more robust template of constraining Russia, China and other systemic rivals.

The EU-27 are not a random grouping, but a community of states wedded to democracy and rule of law, free market economics, individual freedom and universal human rights. Europe's wellbeing and ability to fend for itself will get only worse if the liberal order keeps eroding. On the one hand, the EU must become more protective of itself against disinformation and propaganda, cyberattacks, foreign efforts to slander and undermine the West, and (potential) exploitations of interdependence. On the other hand, it has to become more self-confident and assertive in its efforts to push back and deny rivals leeway to revise the international order. In doing so, it must put to use the full range of its power assets, combining the political, economic, military and normative dimensions, in a flexible and targeted manner. This includes political firmness to call out and sanction rule breakers as much as military skin in the game to contribute to deterrence and reassurance efforts in a meaningful way. Economically, measures like already improved investment screening mechanisms, but also a tougher line against unfair trade practices, precautions in the realms of technology and critical infrastructure, an honest assessment of decoupling needs and conscious choices on the risks of interdependence one is prepared to take, are warranted.

Second: to gain sovereignty, the willing actors of Europe must be able to take the lead. The EU cannot become a more capable, self-reliant actor if the lowest common denominator keeps determining the way ahead. What the EU needs is a more flexible, more modular posture in foreign

"EU Army debates, however, should be viewed with a healthy dose of skepticism."

and security affairs that allows for majoritarianism and coalitions of the willing from its midst to take the lead. Necessarily, this includes the mobilisation and organisation of military power as well as new investments. EU Army debates, however, should be viewed with a healthy dose of skepticism. The goal must be to generate prowess fast and effectively. There are tried and tested ways to improve interoperability and mould national militaries into coherent deterrent and fighting forces. Making the establishment of EU armed forces the prerequisite would lead into the quicksand of national inhibitions and likely thwart the effort before it gets started. Beefing up the EU's security and defense prowess should also not be conceptualised as an alternative to NATO— as strategic autonomy discourses imply. Not only does NATO come first for many EU members, but the EU would also be incapable of replicating NATO's strength. Bolstering European self-reliance within the EU should always be thought of in tandem with NATO, as a way to strengthen the European pillar in NATO, as previous initiatives have been designed to do.

Third: a more flexible EU in foreign, security and defense affairs would gain sovereignty by engaging in broad-based partnership and alliance diplomacy. The world ahead will likely get more uncomfortable: The effects of anarchy will become more immediate, as institutions like the UN Security Council are gridlocked, once again, and international law is broken with impunity. The resultant effects may reverberate regionally and globally under the conditions of an interdependent world. Tying down rule breakers and norm shakers as much as possible should be the model of action. To do so, Europeans need all the partners they can get, and to focus on shared goals and the contribution of power assets to collective endeavors. Seeking to turn the EU into an independent military pole mirroring the US or others is doomed to fail; looking for ways to team up with like-minded allies and link EU power projection means with theirs is the way to go. In doing so, Europeans must learn to think in grand strategic terms and not be consumed by petty interests or sentiments. Recent responses to the AUKUS deal between Australia, the UK and the US underline that Europe is not there yet.

Conclusion

The EU faces the task to revamp itself into a truly sovereign strategic actor. This is a major challenge. The lack of influence of the EU under the current international order must be honestly assessed, taking into account the capability, capacity and potency to identify strengths and weaknesses. While there is a widespread consensus that the EU has to become more self reliant on the international scene, the quest for strategic autonomy in a military sense is an ill-suited approach to go about this goal in an interdependent world of great powers and systemic rivalry. The EU does not need autonomy; it has to become a sovereign and strategically adept entity. Getting there necessitates a plethora of reforms and initiatives, three of which were explored here: The EU requires a more realistic mindset to cope with real-world antagonisms, it needs the willing few who lead the way toward a more modular foreign and security policy, and more, not less, partners and like-minded allies worldwide. The stakes are high and must be clear: To gain strategic sovereignty is not a nice add-on or just another reform area that needs to be taken care of in the EU's complex institutional structure. Its success is essential for the future relevance and survival of the EU as we know it.

Policy Recommendations

1. Competing views on what European integration is and should be all about cannot be glossed over any longer. What is needed is a shared agreement on the EU's value as a protective shield for the sovereignty and well-being of its members in an eroding international order.

2. The EU must frame the world in more realistic terms. Too often, bureaucratic, watered-down or sugar-coated aspriational language clouds EU communications. Though members states are the key players in foreign and security affairs, it is up to the Commission, the High Representative and the European External Action Service to address the challenge of an antagonistic world in clear-cut terms and convey what the EU as a whole can contribute.

3. Leaders should refrain from divisive and delusional ‚EU Army' debates and focus on ways to strengthen EU-NATO cooperation, the European pillar in NATO, and multi-dimensional partnership diplomacy beyond the Euro-Atlantic space.

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