

European Strategic Autonomy and the US

Historically, the United States has been wary of initiatives designed to bolster Europe's strategic autonomy; even now, the Trump administration is working to undermine it. Yet, in the long run, European strategic autonomy could form an indispensable component of a constructive transatlantic relationship.

By Jack Thompson

After years of infrequent and half-hearted discussions, there is now a vigorous debate taking place among European policymakers and analysts about the extent to which Europe should embark on a long-term process designed to increase defense and security cooperation between European Union member states and bolster independent capabilities. Some countries are more enthusiastic than others – Poland, is uneasy about perceived US opposition, whereas France is the most vocal advocate – but the catalysts for the process are difficult to ignore. The international system is moving toward multipolarity and geopolitical competition is intensifying. More importantly, the United States is in at least gradual decline relative to other great powers – most notably China – and, against the backdrop of Donald Trump's ambivalence about the transatlantic relationship, there is growing concern about the extent to which it will be willing to play a significant role in the future of European security.

The US debate about European strategic autonomy is less coherent and narrower than the European version – the subject is less important for Americans and is being followed by a limited number of policymakers and analysts – and the focus tends to be on how it affects the North Atlantic



US President Donald Trump and French President Emmanuel Macron shake hands during a meeting at the Prefecture of Caen on June 6, 2019. *Ludovic Marin / Pool via Reuters*

Treaty Organization (NATO) and the US defense industry. Broader conceptions, encompassing foreign policy challenges such as diverging policies on Iran, attract comparatively little attention in US circles.

The Trump administration opposes European strategic autonomy. It has raised ob-

jections about diverting resources from NATO and discrimination against the US defense industry. In addition, some in the administration worry that European strategic autonomy will undermine the position of primacy that the United States has traditionally enjoyed in NATO. In 2016, before he became National Security Advisor, John

Bolton argued that NATO has always been a US-led alliance and that the development of more robust European military capabilities would inevitably pose a challenge to the Alliance's foundational concept.

In spite of the Trump's administration's hostility, a growing number of US policymakers and analysts are open to European strategic autonomy. Many who favor an internationalist foreign policy have shed apprehensions about potential damage to NATO and US defense interests and view at least a degree of strategic autonomy as the best way for Europe to bolster its capabilities and to play a more substantial role in world affairs. Given the mounting international challenges it faces, these observers understand that partnering with a more muscular Europe is imperative for continued US leadership.

A Hegemonic Perspective, 1990–2008

Americans and Europeans have disagreed about burden sharing since the early days of the transatlantic alliance. However, this debate has taken on new urgency in recent years alongside significant changes in the international system. During the 1990s and for the first few years of the 21st century, US policymakers and analysts tended to operate as if they had single-handedly won the Cold War. They rarely entertained the possibility of a relationship based on

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partnership, rather than US dominance – a tendency that was reinforced by Europe's failure to invest sufficiently in defense.

As early as 1991, US officials worried that Europeans were beginning to envisage a security architecture that would reduce US influence and undermine NATO. In 1998, in response to the creation of the European Security and Defense Identity (ESDI) – which sought to develop capabilities that were “separable but not separate” from NATO – US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright warned that any initiative should avoid preempting Alliance decision-making by de-linking ESDI from NATO, duplicating existing efforts, or discriminating against non-EU members – an admonition which came to be known as the “three D's”. In 1999 and 2000, the US Congress and Secretary of Defense William Cohen expressed unease about the creation of a European rapid reac-

tion force. Similar worries were present for much of the George W. Bush presidency. US Secretary of State Colin Powell declared that the United States should not accept independent EU structures that duplicate existing NATO capabilities.

However, some US officials welcomed a more robust European security and defense policy as long as it was designed to complement NATO, rather than to facilitate an alternative pole of power. Though Albright warned Europeans to avoid the three D's, she also encouraged the creation of the ESDI and stated that the United States would welcome a more capable European partner. Though the Bush administration initially discouraged the development of European defense capabilities outside of NATO, it eventually reconsidered – doubtless chastened by its struggles in the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts. In 2008, US Ambassador to NATO Victoria Nuland called for a strong and united Europe, ready and willing to bear its full measure of responsibility for defending common security and advancing shared values.

Though it was frustrated with Europe's failure to increase defense spending, the Barack Obama administration echoed Nuland's vision. It supported the 2007 Treaty of Lisbon which, Obama remarked, would move Europe further in the direction of integration not only on economic policy but also on a number of security issues, and that he believed a strengthened and renewed EU would be an even better transatlantic partner for the United States. Vice President Joe Biden

concurred, stating that the United States supports the further strengthening of European defense, an increased role for the European Union in preserving peace and security and a fundamentally stronger NATO-EU partnership. Obama administration officials dismissed concerns that a robust European defense industry would harm the United States. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates announced that the United States has no problems with and in fact would encourage the strengthening of the European defense industry, and that as the United States is facing a shrinking of its own defense industries having a robust defense industrial capability between both the United States and its European allies would be very important.

US Thinking Today

US perspectives on European security have become more diverse, driven in large part

by the transition of the international system from unipolarity to multipolarity and the corresponding relative decline of the United States. To understand the implications of this complexity, it helps to outline the main threads of US thought. Each of these strands is fluid and represents tendencies rather than fixed categories. They also correspond with broader schools of thought about the future of US foreign policy.

The *populist nationalist* tendency resents the European failure to spend more on defense, is hostile to the European Union, and prizes US power and national sovereignty. It is often ambivalent about NATO. Donald Trump's reaction to European strategic autonomy – though he has never publicly used that phrase – aligns with this perspective. Christian Whiton, a former senior advisor in the George W. Bush and Trump administrations, urges withdrawal from NATO, which he criticizes as being little more than a mechanism for “Old Europe” to freeloader off of the United States, so that the United States can focus on China and partner with the countries of “New Europe,” such as Poland, which, he views as still having fight in them, and which still carry the torch of Western civilization. This line of thought has spread as far as populist rightwing websites, such as *Breitbart* and *The Federalist*.

Conservative internationalists demand that Europe spend more on defense, even if some discount the possibility that it could ever develop meaningful independent capabilities. Yet many conservative internationalists also warn that the allegedly hapless Europeans, in pursuing strategic autonomy, pose a threat to NATO. How can we explain this contradictory stance? Partly, this reflects the longstanding US worry about Madeleine Albright's three D's. In particular, some conservative internationalists worry that European initiatives such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defense Fund (EDF) – which are designed to increase cooperation and boost spending – will harm the US defense industry. A report by the American Chamber of Commerce to the European Union declared that a strong transatlantic defense and security industry requires open and competitive markets and the removal of outstanding barriers to market access. It argues that the EU's strategic autonomy should be both capability and technology driven, not nationality driven. A number of conservative internationalists believe that

European strategic autonomy will erode US primacy in the Alliance. A report published by the conservative think tank The Heritage Foundation argued that discouraging European strategic autonomy would guarantee that the US has the amount of influence relevant to the level of resources it has committed to Europe.

Recently, a competing perspective has emerged among pro-European conservative internationalists. The late Republican Senator John McCain never spoke explicitly about European strategic autonomy, but he spoke of his “trust” for the European

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Union and called for more cooperation and more connectivity between the United States and the European Union. Former Secretary of Defense James Mattis frequently warned that European efforts must not supplant NATO as the cornerstone of European security, but he remained respectful and in private indicated flexibility about how NATO and initiatives such as PESCO might dovetail. Former diplomat Nicholas Burns has discouraged “stand alone” strategic autonomy for Europe but argued that it is in the US interest to support European defense initiatives – for example the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the European Defense Fund (EDF) and military mobility improvements – so long as these contribute to NATO. Jamie Fly, Senior Fellow at the German Marshall Fund and former foreign policy advisor to Republican Senator Marco Rubio, argues that current European efforts might actually represent one of the best chances of bringing about increased European defense spending and more capabilities, which would be to the benefit of both European and transatlantic security. Republican Lindsey Graham – one of Trump’s closest allies in the US Senate – who previously opposed EU-led defense initiatives, recently revealed that he supports them.

Many US *libertarians and realists* favor a US grand strategy of “restraint” or “offshore balancing,” a perspective that has gained in influence in recent years. Part of this strategy would entail wealthy allies such as Europe assuming primary responsibility for their own defense. Analysts such as John Mearsheimer, Barry Posen, and Stephen Walt view strategic autonomy as an ideal

platform for encouraging a more independent Europe (though some place more value on the transatlantic relationship than others). There are comparatively few foreign policy libertarians and realists but they wield disproportionate influence in academia and national security debates.

Since 2008, *multilateralists* have become more optimistic about the likely effects of closer European cooperation on security and defense. Certainly, multilateralists continue to urge their European counterparts to increase defense spending. During the 2016 presidential campaign, Senator Bernie Sanders said that US allies in Europe should pay their fair share of the defense burden, a comment echoed by other candidates for the 2020 Democratic nomination such as Senator

Elizabeth Warren. However, there is little doubt that most multilateralists support European strategic autonomy. Centrist think tanks such as the Brookings Institution, the Center for a New American Security, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies have published favorable analyses. Democratic presidential candidates have not explicitly mentioned the subject since the start of the race, but their emphatic support for repairing the US-European relationship and view of it as crucial within the context of growing geopolitical competition leave little doubt as to the direction of their thinking. Joe Biden called the idea that the United States can go it alone with no alliances for the next 20 or 30 years a “disaster” and called for building a united front of friends and partners to challenge China’s “abusive behavior.”

The Long-term Outlook

The Trump administration’s efforts to undermine European initiatives have become more aggressive since the departure of James Mattis in late 2018. It has focused its efforts on EDF and PESCO, arguing that they will discriminate against the US defense industry, and raised the possibility of US retaliation. In addition to direct discussions with European officials, it has sought to influence the process through a subtle lobbying campaign at the national level. There is no reason to believe that the administration will rethink its opposition. There is merit to objections that PESCO and the EDF will result in fewer European purchases of US weapons. However, some analysts persuasively argue that this is a price worth paying, because cultivating a robust defense industry is essential for developing sustainable European security ca-

Further Reading

- Besch, S. and Quencez, M. (2019) **The Importance of Being Protectionist: A Long View of the European Defense Fund** *War on the Rocks*
- Biscop, S. (2018) **European Defence: Give PESCO a Chance** *Survival* 60 (3), 161–80
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- Drent, M. (2018) **European Strategic Autonomy: Going it Alone?** *Clingendael Institute*
- Fiott, D. (2018) **Strategic Autonomy: Towards ‘European Sovereignty’ in Defence?** *European Union Institute for Security Studies*
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pabilities. It is also reasonable to consider replacing the phrase “strategic autonomy” with alternative wording suggesting cooperation rather than aloofness.

Nonetheless, the long-term outlook for US thinking is relatively promising. Partly, this is thanks to the growing recognition that a stronger, more independent Europe will bolster, not degrade, transatlantic security. Democrats are almost all multilateralists and, as such, will likely encourage European strategic autonomy. It is more difficult to predict the attitude of the next Republican administration, but the flexibility of some conservative internationalists is encouraging. The libertarian and realist perspective also exerts influence in conservative circles, though this could be a mixed blessing – it adds another voice in favor of European strategic autonomy, but in some cases advocates downgrading the value of the transatlantic bond.

The other reason to be hopeful is the changing role of the United States in the international system. When Madeleine Albright voiced her concern about the three D’s in 1998, the United States was at the height of its post-Cold War power and

could afford to think like a hegemon. It no longer enjoys that luxury. US experts are more receptive to European strategic autonomy partly because the United States needs help if it is to retain its position of leadership in a multipolar world. As an explanation for the evolution of his thinking, Senator Lindsey Graham argued that anything that could help bring European capabilities forward, he was for.

Many populist nationalists and some conservative internationalists will remain hos-

tile to European institutions and continue to believe that the United States can maintain a position of unilateralist primacy in the transatlantic relationship. However, as international challenges mount, US flexibility about European strategic autonomy should continue to increase. A more autonomous Europe need not mean a more antagonistic US-European relationship. In fact, by beginning the process of creating a more equitable division of labor and of facilitating a more vigorous European security and defense policy, it might be the best

way to ensure the survival of the most important partnership in the international system.

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