

Europe: Greater Autonomy, Better Allies

Europe's greater strategic autonomy alone will not provide European security. The Sino-American rivalry is an opportunity for Europe to boost its conventional defense capabilities while galvanizing the transatlantic partnership with a new Chinese dimension.

By Dominika Kunertova

The hasty withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan, the most visible NATO mission, left America's European allies upset. AUKUS, the new defense partnership among the US, the UK, and Australia, then created fury in France, as it was left blindsided by its close Anglo-Saxon allies. Some European leaders have been pondering (again) the risk of US disengagement from European security affairs and perceiving the US as an unreliable ally. As NATO prepares to draft its new Strategic Concept, the EU members have been engaged in a grand strategic dialogue termed "Strategic Compass" since 2020 to advance strategic autonomy, instead of automated strategy that currently leaves the EU without choice of action but to follow the US lead.

Europe's defense capabilities are neither strategic nor autonomous. Achieving strategic autonomy is a long and perilous process that requires serious expectation management regarding time and resources, as well as conceptual clarity. Yet beyond the problems with strategic dissonance, operational procedures, and capability development, Europeans cannot achieve full strategic sovereignty without the US nuclear umbrella.

To protect European security interests and avoid turning strategic autonomy into strategic irresponsibility, Europeans should improve the readiness of their conventional capabilities, yet pursue this ambition in a way that does not risk negative alteration in the alliance with the US.

Key Points

- European defense debates should put more emphasis on autonomy *to* (act), rather than autonomy *from* (great powers).
- European countries need to improve the readiness of their armed forces; yet developing a full spectrum of capabilities is unrealistic, i.e. include a nuclear deterrent.
- To keep the US nuclear umbrella over Europe and protect European security interests, European countries should achieve greater strategic autonomy with their conventional capabilities and within a rebalanced transatlantic relationship.
- This means they should 1) unburden the US in Europe by developing more capable conventional defense forces and 2) form a European "Quad" to help the US meet the challenge from China in the economic and technology domains.

Europeans therefore need to balance their ambition for strategic autonomy with their need for credible nuclear deterrence.

In the context of China's growing assertiveness, Europe should shoulder the burden for its own conventional defense so that the US can devote more energy to upholding the international order against its Chinese contestant. The US, in turn, should keep the nuclear umbrella over Europe, while its European allies strengthen the credibility of nuclear sharing. Improving European conventional defense capabilities need to be based on a pragmatic realization that European interests will not necessarily coincide with American ones, with Washington prioritizing security challenges in the Asia-Pacific. Having realized that China is not a benign trading partner, European countries need to double down on "China-proofing" their technologies, economies, and societies. Europeans need to better coordinate with the US, since they alone cannot keep Chinese influence at bay. The unfolding Sino-American great-power competition is thus an opportunity for fulfilling Europe's ambitions for strategic autonomy.

Strategic autonomy, or similar

Strategic autonomy gained notoriety thanks to French President Emmanuel Macron, who would like to make Europe a more powerful international security actor. Yet in the discourse of European leaders and EU institutions, the strategic autonomy concept has been surrounded by a veil of vagueness as to its content and geostrategic context.

The understandings of the concept diverge in terms of level and scope. Most EU governments and high EU bureaucrats would like to broaden the scope and pursue strategic autonomy regarding Europe's economy; for instance, by internationalizing the use of the euro as a reserve currency and as import-export denomination, and by pursuing self-sufficiency on key products with fragile supply chains, such as microchips.

Within the scope of defense and security policy, the level of ambition depends on the degrees of autonomy. It can range from the ability to conduct missions and operations autonomously, to developing indigenous weapon systems, to reducing dependencies on great powers outside Europe. The EU Strategic Compass is the most recent iteration of efforts to give content to strategic autonomy with the aim of creating a common European strategic culture. This member states-led process will culminate with the adoption of this EU strategy document in March 2022 under the French EU presidency.

The existing split in the political framing between the two major European states, Germany and France, is the main problem. While the Strategic Update 2021 of the



German Chancellor Scholz and French President Macron attend a news conference at the Elysee Palace, December 10, 2021. *Thibault Camus / Reuters*

French Defense and National Security Strategic Review portrays NATO as the bedrock of collective defense, the French are pushing for greater autonomy from the US (especially after how the US handled the conclusion of the AUKUS deal that resulted in Australia terminating the acquisition of French submarines). In contrast, the Germans have been more vocal about acknowledging the importance of NATO. The Balts and Central Europeans shrug at any discussions that would call into question the role of NATO and the US in the region: Others even have an opt-out from the EU security and defense. Small states also fear that the strategic industrial autonomy paraded by France and Germany would serve as a tool to justify the latter two's protectionism.

Most European leaders stand in the middle, believing that European strategic autonomy and transatlantic cooperation are not mutually exclusive goals. Few realize, however, what it would take to get to even a modest level of strategic autonomy.

Strategic inefficiencies

Strategy aligns means through ways with ends, and in this sense, European countries have a lot to sort out. Europe's three-fold problem – capability development, operational procedures, and strategic dissonance – offers clear evidence that security and defense are still intergovernmental policies coordinated among individual European countries. The European defense market is fragmented by national borders. Although in absolute terms European countries spend more than 370 billion USD on defense, this spending is inefficient due to national command bureaucracies and armaments standardization problems.

Developing an autonomous technological-industrial base is necessary but on its own cannot unlock the potential of military capabilities. In the recent debate on

what specifically is required of European countries to autonomously defend themselves against a potential Russian attack, military experts stress that the real problem is not defense spending (input quantity), but the readiness and sustainability of Europe's military forces (output quality).

Europe's military readiness shortfalls are compounded by the absence of a European integrated command and control structure, which curtails the ability to conduct operations independently. How effectively the EU can use NATO's command structure remains obscured due to the informal abstention requirement of NATO non-EU countries and EU non-NATO countries.

The institutionalized security and defense cooperation in Europe adds further complexity to strategic autonomy ambitions. The NATO-EU "turf war" is heavily politicized. Despite high-profile debates over the past 20 years, they have failed to implement an efficient and fair division of tasks. This would be an important step towards crystallizing the strategic ends of European strategic autonomy. Quite tellingly, minilateral military cooperation shows that neither of the two organizations seem to be the first choice of Europeans for some expeditionary operations, such as the French operation in Sahel (though it still depends on the US military for intelligence and logistics) and the French European Intervention Initiative.

A sober evaluation suggests the EU is a security, rather than defense, actor whose military initiatives serve as a means of European diplomacy. The EU is a standard-setter whose geopolitical ambitions should be concentrated on combating climate change, not Russian tanks or hypersonic missiles. While NATO has the unified command structure and long experience of military-to-military cooperation in a multinational, standardized, and interoperable way, with the US as a member, the EU has the resources to monitor countries' budgets and fund the development of European capabilities. While the EU has tools to promote industrial autonomy, NATO has tools for operational autonomy.

The US as a European Power

In the strategic autonomy debate, the US is either the question or the answer. Yet when it comes to nuclear deterrence, Europe's relationship with the US is not optional for the time being. This is because the European ambition is short of this ultimate nuclear capability. In a world in which Europe continues to face a threat from a nuclear-armed Russia, full strategic autonomy is impossible without a European(ized) nuclear deterrent. While NATO would have an advantage in conventional forces, the superiority in non-strategic nuclear forces on land, sea, and in the air al-

lows Russia to threaten the early use of its nuclear forces to end a conflict with NATO on its terms. To counter such a scenario, the US' nuclear forces are indispensable.

This level of strategic autonomy remains an illusion as British and French nuclear forces alone would not suffice to successfully deter Russia and neither NATO nor the EU could provide the necessary political and military framework for accommodating a purely European nuclear deterrence capability. Although most European countries are happy to seek defense industrial and operational autonomy, they largely accept the US' traditional role in providing nuclear deterrence in Europe (except for the signatories of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, *CSS Analysis 286*).

Enter China

The new transatlantic bargain should see the US getting more European help to address China's assertive rise while reaffirming its continued commitment to European security in the form of a nuclear deterrent. The risk of the US disengaging from European affairs is compounded by the tangible Chinese threat to European security taking shape in technology and economic domains.

European strategic autonomy therefore depends on two conditions: 1) improving conventional defense and deterrence capabilities to take greater ownership of European security, in no small part based on a pragmatic recognition that the US is prioritizing the Asia-Pacific; 2) aligning with the US to rebuff China's economic expansionism, international standards setting, and race for technological supremacy.

Further Reading

Hugo Meijer / Stephen G. Brooks, "**Illusions of Autonomy: Why Europe Cannot Provide for Its Security If the United States Pulls Back,**" *International Security* 45:4 (2021): 7–43.

Examines why Europeans are unable to pool and effectively employ military power.

Barry R. Posen, "**Europe Can Defend Itself,**" *Survival* 62:6 (2020), 7–34. Argues that European defense autonomy is not an unaffordable goal.

Lucia Retter et al., "**European Strategic Autonomy in Defence,**" *RAND Europe* 2021.

Outlines three different possible futures of European strategic autonomy in defence.

Luis Simón / Linde Desmaele / Jordan Becker, "**Europe as a Secondary Theater? Competition with China and the Future of America's European Strategy,**" *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 15:1 (2021), 90–115.

Portrays trade-offs in US grand strategy on Europe versus Asia hierarchy.

The Biden Administration has made coalition-building central to its policies toward China. The US does not need an Asian NATO as much as it needs a European “Quad” (after the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue among the US, Australia, India, and Japan). A similar concert of powers among the US, UK, France, and Germany (though Germany is the least likely of the major European countries to confront China) would coordinate on major China-related geostrategic issues: making sure that European technology does not enable China’s military modernization, preventing Beijing from controlling critical infrastructure in Europe, deepening engagement through the EU-US Trade and Technology Council, or boycotting the Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

However, Europeans are not on the same page in defining what kind of a challenge China poses to European security. While most see China as a partner for dealing with climate change and environmental protection, China emerges as a competitor in terms of technological leadership, production standards, Internet governance, and markets in third countries. Growing economic interdependence complicates the picture, however. Both the EU and China are now the other’s largest trading partner, with China overtaking the US in 2020. The multilayered relationship between Europe and China also includes major divergences on human rights and political freedoms, data protection, and cyber security. The EU expressed concerns over China’s claims in the South China Sea and the crack-down on democracy in Hong Kong, and imposed sanctions on China for persecution of minorities in Xinjiang in 2021 (its first significant sanctions on China since 1989).

Europeans were naive about China being a benign trading partner and docile in the face of China’s influence projection through investments. The possibility of Europeans sleepwalking into the Sinosphere could become a liability for the transatlantic partnership at times when China’s strategy is to prevent a strong EU-US alliance against China and to praise the EU’s strategic autonomy talk as a China-friendly policy.

This time, Europeans would not support their US ally by sending their troops “out of area.” Even though some 40 per cent of Europe’s foreign trade passes through

the South China Sea, any military operations under the EU or NATO flag would not be in Europe’s security interests. Seen from Washington, European capabilities need to focus on deterring Russia, yet without deepening the confrontation. The EU’s recently launched Indo-Pacific Strategy builds on a cooperative approach with an interest in protecting the sea lines of communication and freedom of navigation.

Trials and travails

European strategizing should put more emphasis on autonomy *to* (act), rather than autonomy *from* (the US). This entails the need to 1) provide European security in a credible way with indigenous European conventional capabilities; and 2) make sure that European defense planners can count on the US nuclear deterrent. Aligning ambitions with existing limitations and the realities of great-power rivalries, full European strategic autonomy remains an illusion for the time being. In the conventional domain alone, Europeans need to overcome numerous challenges in terms of means, ways, and ends. Yet they need not abandon their ambition to become a responsible security provider, as the US is not a panacea for all European security neuroses.

In the meantime, the US-China confrontation will only deepen and spill from the tech and trade domains to other policy areas. Under Xi Jinping, whose rule appears set to extend long into the future, the Chinese Communist Party is likely to extend its control over Chinese companies and associations abroad. The pressure on European countries to make their position explicit, even though doing so would probably yield no economic gains, will increase. Europeans and other US allies need to realize that relying on the US for security and on China for prosperity is unsustainable. Embracing strategic ambiguity in Brussels would endanger the paramount security benefits provided by the transatlantic partnership.

Dominika Kunertova is a Senior Researcher in the Global Security Team at the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich.

Policy Perspectives is published by the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zürich. The CSS is a center of competence for Swiss and international security policy.

Series Editor: Brian G. Carlson
Issue Editor: Niklas Masuhr
Layout: Miriam Dahinden-Ganzoni

Feedback welcome: PolicyPerspectives@sipo.gess.ethz.ch
More issues and free online subscription:
css.ethz.ch/en/publications/css-policy-perspectives

Most recent editions:

The Role of Value Systems in Conflict Resolution (9/9)
Redesigning Nuclear Arms Control for New Realities (9/8)
NATO’s Strategic Concept: Three Do’s and Don’ts (9/7)
Nord Stream 2: It’s Time to Change Perspective (9/6)
European Drone Clubs Stall Strategic Autonomy (9/5)
COVAX Needs a Political Future (9/4)

© 2021 Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zürich
ISSN: 2296-0244; DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000520328