





## POLICY BRIEF


### What are the Next Steps to Reach European Strategic Autonomy?

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# WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS TO REACH EUROPEAN STRATEGIC AUTONOMY?

## Introduction

When Alain Peyrefitte, a French diplomat, asked General de Gaulle in 1962 "*What is the purpose of Europe?*", the latter replied "*not to be dominated by the Americans or the Russians*"<sup>1</sup>. Since then, the idea of an independent Europe has taken many shapes and forms. However, the European Union seems today to be on the edge of a turning point: reaching European strategic autonomy seems more needed and more achievable than ever.

The concept of EU strategic autonomy has been at the heart of minds, conversations, debates, controversies, policies and projects for over a decade. However, it seems that some clarification is still needed on what exactly is strategic autonomy and how it would improve EU foreign policy, notably by allowing Europeans to be in charge of their destiny in an increasingly conflict-prone world.

Strategic autonomy isn't a new concept and has been part of EU language for a long time. The concept can be traced back to the French notion of strategic autonomy, presented in the 1994 White Paper on defence. It was then mentioned again in its updated version in 2008 and defined as "*the ability to use military force autonomously*". In the European Union, from an initial focus on defence the concept later included a broader set of themes such as the economy, health or technology. However, it retains the defence and security dimension at its core.

### **The early days of strategic autonomy in EU agreed language**

- 2013: the Council referred to strategic autonomy in relation to the defence industry, to strengthen the EU's ability of becoming a better partner through the development of CSDP.
  - 2015: the Foreign Affairs Council used the same terminology.
  - 2016: the EU Global Strategy refers to "an appropriate level of strategic autonomy".
  - 2016: the conclusions of the Council attempt to define the concept: "capacity to act autonomously when and where necessary and with partners wherever possible".
- Strategic autonomy has since been fully adopted in EU agreed language.

### **Definition of European Strategic Autonomy used in this paper**

European strategic autonomy is the ability to act autonomously and the ability to choose whether and in what ways to collaborate with like-minded partners in matters of security and defence. The capacity to act autonomously implies both the ability to decide and to implement decisions in an autonomous manner.

(source: European Parliament Research Service).

Over the past few months, there has been a clear push by heads of states, EU representatives and policy makers, for a stronger Europe. More generally, there has been in the EU a strong desire to be considered like a legitimate and action-oriented political union and a wish to be seen as a global player. Achieving this positioning without being autonomous seems unlikely and strategic autonomy is therefore largely seen by some EU leaders as an urgent step to make to strengthen the EU both internally and externally.

Josep Borell, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, recently detailed why strategic autonomy is more salient than ever today<sup>2</sup>:

- The weight of Europe on the global stage is shrinking. With growing competition from China, the US, Russia or even India on both geopolitical and economical levels, the risk for the EU to become irrelevant is present. Strategic autonomy can therefore be seen as "a process of political survival", without – evidently – moving away from the EU's traditional alliances.
- The economic interdependence has become very conflict prone. This has been particularly highlighted by the COVID-19 crisis as it revealed the asymmetries in our interdependent system and the vulnerability of Europe, beyond the security and defence field.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/0620-european-sovereignty-strategic-autonomy-europe-as-a-power-what-reality-for-the-european-union>

<sup>2</sup> [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/89865/why-european-strategic-autonomy-matters\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/89865/why-european-strategic-autonomy-matters_en)

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- The growing number of conflicts and tensions in its periphery calls for unity and clarity in the way the EU will act (Sahel, Mediterranean, Eastern front). Most of these aren't topics of interest for the US, which will thus no longer engage in large-scale operations in these regions.

The Trump presidency has also contributed over the past few years to the shaping up of European strategic autonomy, as it put the transatlantic security community under pressure. The US President held an inconsistent position on both NATO and the EU, which led to uncertainty about the credibility and the future of US engagement across the Atlantic. The former President also repeatedly insisted on the need for a better 'burden sharing' within NATO between the US and European allies. This call for heightened spending by EU governments on defence along with heightened ambiguity around US commitments to collective defence contributed to the EU « wake-up call » in terms of building strategic autonomy.

It is therefore legitimate to wonder how close the European Union is to reaching strategic autonomy. What are the next steps to take for EU policy makers to make strategic autonomy a tangible reality? What obstacles will need to be overcome?

## Policy Context

### **Background: The road from the European Defence Community to EU strategic Autonomy**

Since the end of the Second World war, there have been a significant number of initiatives to increase European defence integration: a steady yet bumpy evolution from the European Defence Community (EDC) in the early 50s to today's debates around European Strategic Autonomy. The path towards greater EU defence integration has long been focused on putting in place new institutions, frameworks and programmes but sometimes without adequate political support and backup resources.

A brief overview of the building of a "Defence EU":

- 1949 : Creation of NATO.
- 1952 : creation of the EDC with the goal of creating a European army at a supranational level. However, after the French Parliament opposed the Treaty ratification in 1954, the EDC failed.
- 1992 : the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) was implemented as the 2<sup>nd</sup> pillar of the Maastricht Treaty, and revived the European defence project.
- 1992 : At the Helsinki Council, EU leaders agreed to develop by 2003 the capacity to deploy an independent military force of 50,000 personnel.
- 1999 : the Political and Security Committee (PSC) is created to shape the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) by maintaining oversight on international events and conflicts as well as to provide politico-military expertise.
- 2009 : the Lisbon Treaty strengthens the CSDP, creates the EU External Action Service (EEAS) and establishes the position of High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security policy. The treaty put the EU on the path to a common military force and strengthened the Union's foreign policy tools.
- 2016 : the Global Strategy for the European Union Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS) is published by the EEAS and establishes 5 areas to strengthen the EU defence and security policy.

Despite these initiatives and structures, the European Union has not yet materialised a tangible "Defence EU", does not yet include a military side or a practical framework for generating and commanding a large multinational force to defend Europe's collective security. European strategic autonomy has since become a recurring theme and a fundamental topic of discussion and policymaking in EU institutions as well as in member states.

### **Contrasted Perceptions Among Member States and Partners**

Both the goals of EU strategic autonomy and the ways to reach it are perceived differently by EU member states and also externally by EU partners, which can be the source of tensions. Member states are indeed split between those leading the efforts for more strategic autonomy and those more sceptic. These differences

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originate from the fact that they don't have the same history and geography and therefore the same perceptions of risks.

- **France: President Macron as the European strategic autonomy's champion.**

Macron's view of European strategic autonomy was first thoroughly explained in his Sorbonne speech in 2017<sup>3</sup>: a strong call for a more autonomous EU with a capacity to defend itself. Today, the French EU Presidency which began in January 2022 has been the perfect opportunity for the French President to push for more European strategic autonomy, a topic he has always put on the forefront of his EU agenda. "The agenda for a sovereign Europe will be accelerated by the French Presidency. Europe must rise to the major economic, educational, migration and military challenges" he stated during a press conference<sup>4</sup>. In Macron's view, reaching European strategic autonomy – but more generally a form of European collective defence – is a long-standing ambition and is needed to strengthen the EU's credibility as a whole. In more tangible terms, Macron has pledged numerous audacious initiatives including the setting up of the Strategic Compass – aiming at setting a common security and defence culture and vision of EU member states. A "Summit on Defence" is also on the agenda for the first half of 2022, under the French Presidency and following an impulsion from EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. She had indeed stressed the necessity of a stronger Defence EU when facing the AUKUS crisis in September 2021.

- **Germany: a ping-pong match with France on European strategic autonomy.**

Germany's position regarding strategic autonomy has largely evolved over the past few years. In 2017, former Chancellor Angela Merkel followed Macron's steps and stated Europe indeed needed to take its destiny in its own hands, as the US seemed a less and less reliable partner during the Trump administration. 2017 was a year filled with bilateral cooperation between France and Germany, notably around EU foreign and security policy initiatives<sup>5</sup>. However, in 2019 following the French President's famous comments on NATO's « *brain death* », Chancellor Merkel firmly rebutted that Europe couldn't defend itself for now and was « *dependent on NATO* ». In 2020, German Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer (AKK) made a strong statement and clarified that « *illusions of European strategic autonomy must come to an end: Europeans won't be able to replace the US's role as a security provider* », positioning Germany's view in direct opposition with Macron's. Berlin thus seemed to be blowing hot and cold on the issue.

- **In Europe, those more sceptic would rather maintain a special bond with the US.**

While France and Germany were very vocal about their disagreements regarding the EU's capacity to reach strategic autonomy, other member states also voiced their opinions. Spanish PM quickly echoed AKK's statement « *I would say that I'm with this German vision of international relations* ». Polish Defence Minister Mariusz Błaszczak stated in a blunt declaration that « *(the EU) must be closer to the U.S. than ever before* ». The Polish position cannot come as a surprise: the idea of an autonomous Europe is not seen with great enthusiasm but rather with strong cautionness in the Baltic states. From Warsaw to Riga, from Vilnius to Tallinn, these member states wish more for a strengthening of the transatlantic relationship. This wish directly stems from the history and geostrategic contexts these countries face: a growingly adverse regional environment, and notably a geographical closeness to Russia, which is seen as a tangible threat in this region of Europe. Poland is for example very attached to the US military presence on its territory and pushes for a stronger NATO, rather than a stronger EU defence.

- **The US: between scepticism and support.**

Facing these European efforts to reach strategic autonomy, the US will have to come to terms with the idea of a more autonomous Europe – and therefore a more independent Europe. The concept of European strategic

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2017/09/26/president-macron-gives-speech-on-new-initiative-for-europe>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/282833-emmanuel-macron-09122021-union-europeenne>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/fachpublikationen/Kempin\\_Kunz\\_France\\_Germany\\_European\\_Strategic\\_Autonomy\\_2017.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/fachpublikationen/Kempin_Kunz_France_Germany_European_Strategic_Autonomy_2017.pdf)

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autonomy has not always been understood clearly on the other side of the Atlantic. The US have long considered that EU allies were not doing enough in terms of defence spending and capabilities building. But the recent push for strategic autonomy has led to US officials voicing reservations that a Defence Europe could undermine or duplicate the NATO system. It is also clear that the American scepticism towards European strategic autonomy also has a lot to do with the fact that reaching it would diminish the US influence in EU security affairs as well as the EU member states' dependence on the US defence industry.

However, the Trump and Biden administrations didn't have the same reaction to recent EU efforts. The 2016-2020 administration perceived them as a pull-away from the US. The Trump administration's view was that a dollar spent on the creation of a European army was a dollar less towards NATO funding. On the other hand, the Biden administration's perception was rather positive. The US gradually became more sensitive to the idea of a « stronger EU pillar », meaning that a stronger EU is a stronger ally even more capable of sharing the burden of collective security, whether in the framework of NATO or not.

In the end, as Josep Borrell recently put it “*about the Atlantic Alliance, it can only truly work if it behaves as an evolving relationship between consenting and equal partners. That is why I believe that European strategic autonomy is fully compatible with a stronger transatlantic bond and even a precondition for it*”<sup>6</sup>.

- **NATO: a much-needed cooperation.**

Finally, the EU/NATO relationship has often been source of confusion or scepticism from all sides. Many, from policymakers to civilians or political representatives, often opposed the two entities or even pinning them against each other as competitive structures. After a few years of much-needed explanations and clarifications by both parties, it is now largely accepted that a stronger European pillar in the framework of NATO is a win-win situation<sup>7</sup>. A stronger and more united EU on defence-related issues will make the EU an even stronger partner for the US in a context of heightened global tensions.

In 2018, the EU and NATO pledged to work together more closely and emphasised that decision in their Joint Declaration<sup>8</sup>. Since then, the cooperation has reached an unprecedented level, as it was acknowledged in the London Declaration of December 2019<sup>9</sup>. The ongoing update of the 2010 Strategic Concept – which should be finalised in 2022 – will also formally establish the complementarity of the two bodies. It has been reminded numerous times that the traditional and historical transatlantic Alliance is in no way put back into question with the development of European strategic autonomy QUOTE. NATO remains the only viable framework to ensure the collective security and the territorial defence of Europe.

## Recommendations

Moving on from these contrasted perceptions, the need to act in concrete ways is more visible than ever. The European Union has often been criticised for its “diplomacy of words” and the difficulty to reach strategic autonomy poses a risk of seeing the EU under fire again for not acting fast enough. The European Union was built following the “small steps” approach and it is therefore legitimate to say that it is also a legitimate approach for the European strategic autonomy. The end-goal, some would stay end-state, of EU strategic autonomy is a long road ahead. This is why this paper aims at presenting feasible and tangible policy options, which would allow the European Union to make its way towards an integrated Defence EU.

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<sup>6</sup> [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/89865/why-european-strategic-autonomy-matters\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/89865/why-european-strategic-autonomy-matters_en)

<sup>7</sup> Howorth, Jolyon. « Strategic Autonomy and EU-NATO Cooperation: A Win-Win Approach », *L'Europe en Formation*, vol. 389, no. 2, 2019, pp. 85-103.

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_156626.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_156626.htm)

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_171584.htm?selectedLocale=en](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_171584.htm?selectedLocale=en)

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## → #1: Strengthening the already-existing practical mechanisms of cooperation : the links between EDF, CARD and PESCO must be clarified.

Both the European Defence Fund (EDF) and the PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation) are very good examples of concrete mechanisms that contribute to the establishment of European strategic autonomy. The EDF<sup>10</sup> is an initiative stemming from the Commission to encourage and support collaborative R&D on defence and to foster a competitive defence industrial base in the EU. The PESCO<sup>11</sup> is a disposition of the Lisbon Treaty which introduces the possibility for a core group of member states to develop their defence cooperation. The Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD)<sup>12</sup> is a process of monitoring defence plans of EU member states to coordinate their spending and identify possibilities of cooperative projects. It operates under the European Defence Agency in cooperation with the European External Action Service. Together with the PESCO and the EDF, it forms a new defence package in the EU.

These frameworks should be used to the maximum of their capacities: their successes or failures will determine how ideas of European strategic autonomy in defence translate into tangible, real-world outputs. But these initiatives also need to be better linked together, in order for them to support one another more easily. We could suggest for example that the office of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security policy – who was in charge of drafting the EU’s Global Strategy in 2016 – draft a food-for-thought paper focused on ways these three frameworks could work together even better. This would be a first step towards linking them in an overarching framework, such as a “Council of EU Defence” / “EU Defence Ministry” that have been mentioned by policymakers before.

## → #2: Encouraging Member States to develop a coordinated approach to strategic issues and the defence industry through the setting up of the ‘Strategic Compass’.

The idea of the ‘Strategic Compass’ is to unite EU member states around a common foreign and security policy understanding and a more-largely shared defence culture. Launched under the German presidency in 2020 – and soon to be completed under the French one, the goal of this new tool is to “develop a sovereign, European strategy”<sup>13</sup>. The Strategic Compass will focus on the years 2025-2030 with the overarching goal to strengthen a solid and united security and defence understanding in the EU. It has been stressed by both Josep Borrell and the French President that the Strategic Compass would be the equivalent of an EU military doctrine for the years to come. The main areas of interest and action will be crisis management, capacity building, partnerships and resilience. This new initiative will join the afore-mentioned EU Defence frameworks and should bring more unity and coherence to these somewhat stand-alone initiatives.

As the Strategic Compass should be up and running in the next few weeks, this paper stresses the importance of relaying its existence, purpose and functioning nationally. Each member states should develop its own strategy to adopt this new tool and not only incorporate it in their own national security policies but also find ways to harmonize their own strategic culture and a collective one. In that way, the EU Defence culture will constantly draw from member states’ national cultures and vice versa.

## → #3: Maintaining a fruitful NATO-EU relationship, with a continuous effort to clarify the cooperation between the two bodies to avoid misconceptions and scepticism.

As stressed in this paper, the NATO-EU relationship has long been the object of numerous misunderstandings or even scepticism. However, since 2016 and the Joint Declaration on NATO-EU cooperation, the latter has reached an all-time high. These efforts should be maintained and even heightened as the practical realisation of meetings and exchanges at all levels have been slower.

<sup>10</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/defence-industry-space/eu-defence-industry/european-defence-fund-edf\\_fr](https://ec.europa.eu/defence-industry-space/eu-defence-industry/european-defence-fund-edf_fr)

<sup>11</sup> <https://pesco.europa.eu/>

<sup>12</sup> [https://eda.europa.eu/what-we-do/EU-defence-initiatives/coordinated-annual-review-on-defence-\(card\)](https://eda.europa.eu/what-we-do/EU-defence-initiatives/coordinated-annual-review-on-defence-(card))

<sup>13</sup> <https://diplomatist.com/2022/01/18/the-idea-of-strategic-autonomy-as-pushed-by-emmanuel-macron-key-to-eus-strategic-performance/>

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This paper encourages both parties to contribute in drafting a “Charter of Cooperation”, settling on a set of missions and tasks that the either NATO or European Union can and should handle on their own, and another set for which a strong cooperation or collaboration is essential to move forward. This clear articulation of tasks would be a practical first small step in order to clarify and better delineate the core responsibilities of both institutions, with the end-goal of avoiding further ambiguities and confusion.

We would also encourage a sustained exchange of food-for-thought papers or policy analysis of global trends and threats between the EU and NATO so that both institutions can feed each other’s debates and policy making.

Finally, a bridge needs to be built between NATO’s Strategic Concept – currently under review, and the upcoming EU’s Strategic Compass. Both represent extremely useful tools and will play the roles of compasses for both institutions. Therefore, they should mutually reinforce and complement each other: practically, this should take the form of bilateral meetings on a regular basis at a working level to ensure coherence is maintained throughout the establishment of both SCs.

## **→ #4: Sustaining intense dialogue at all levels between the EU and the US to avoid misunderstandings and tackle common security challenges.**

As we showed in this paper, building the European strategic autonomy doesn’t mean replacing the historical and traditional transatlantic partnership with the US, whether through NATO or outside of the Alliance. Now that a coherent understanding of the concept of European strategic autonomy on both sides of the Atlantic is emerging, a high-level definition of the term would be needed to finalize this clarification. The Strategic Compass should contribute to that as well as it should help the American partner better grasp where the EU wants to go in terms of defence integration and security commitments, and the means to implement this ambition. This new tool will therefore be beneficial not only internally but also externally, especially for a partner like the US.

Therefore, an active dialogue between the EU and the US on security and defence matters at all levels needs to be intensified. This should happen both at working levels and governments or institutions levels. This will allow both parties to stay in phase with each other and engage greatly to tackle security challenges together or alongside each other. This dialogue is even more needed as both parties have emphasised the alignment of their values and their need to cooperate, especially when facing emerging competitors or rivals – such as China or Russia.

## **Conclusion**

Strategic autonomy should be seen as an ever-evolving process, long-term oriented, rather than a magic wand to unite the European Union. The new tensed international context and conflicted geopolitical dynamics might be what will push the EU to finally rely on itself to guarantee its future. European strategic autonomy is dearly needed to ensure that EU member states increasingly take control of their themselves, especially their security and defence. The concept and reality of EU strategic autonomy will continue to move forward, and chances of success will likely be greater if policymakers follow the infamous “small steps policy”.



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