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European Strategic Autonomy: Stop Talking, Start Planning

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POLICY BRIEF

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European Strategic Autonomy: Stop Talking, Start Planning

The term 'European strategic autonomy' often triggers alarm, disagreement, and mockery. Yet as a political project it is neither ridiculous nor wrong. Europeans should be able to act jointly and more autonomously in defence of their security interests and, done well, this would strengthen, not threaten, the defence partnership with the United States. But Europe's current lack of ability to act makes this an unachievable objective in the short term.

We argue that transatlantic security needs a new, more serious approach to European strategic autonomy for the coming decades: a state-led, EU-supported, US-backed, Europe-wide build-up towards greater levels of autonomy, closely aligned with NATO, the United States, and the post-Brexit UK. This approach is more likely to succeed by concentrating on key building blocks for autonomy than by setting a specific but distant 'headline' goal.

A subsequent ELN policy paper will consider in more detail four of these building blocks: addressing military readiness, filling key capability gaps, fostering strategic convergence, and preparing for next generation threats.

Ambition vs. Reality

For Europe's pretensions to autonomy to be taken seriously, Europeans need to prove their ability to act by owning the necessary military capabilities and being willing to use them. But three factors are unlikely to change any time soon and should be taken into account: the patchwork nature of the European defence and security architecture, the differing strategic interests and priorities between European states,¹ and the critical lack of European capabilities and consequent long-term dependence on the United States.

The main problem with the debate on European strategic autonomy is the gap between political rhetoric and military reality. It is no secret that Europeans are heavily dependent on Washington when it comes to critical military capabilities. As London and Paris were reminded over the NATO-led military intervention in Libya in 2011, Europeans cannot run even a modest-sized operation without the US. In the short to medium term, European states will be unable to conduct either intensive crisis management operations or collective defence on their own. The bigger the operation, the more they would have to patch together the force and improvise. Today there is simply no credible European military alternative to American leadership.

There is much brave talk in Europe of an ambition for "EU strategic autonomy," of "*l'Europe de la défense*," of Europeans taking their fate into their own hands.² Yet we have

1 There are strategic consequences to the differences between European countries in threat assessments, national interests, priorities, and rules of engagement. These differences are problematic for joint operations and deployments as well as for meaningful cooperation on procurement, training, logistics, and so forth.

2 Giulia Paravicini, "[Angela Merkel: Europe must take](#)

not seen many results, still less a plan. If European “strategic autonomy” is just political hot air, it will eventually confirm the prejudice that the EU is just talk, complicate relations within NATO, signal weakness to potential adversaries, and do damage with Americans who are already disenchanted by what they see as the serial inability of the richest economies on the planet to look after their own security. European dependence on the US is a consequence of European defence fragmentation but the reverse is also true. We appear stuck in a self-perpetuating cycle at a time when security dependency and complacency among Europeans is increasingly being tested.

European strategic autonomy should therefore either be dropped as a concept or taken seriously as a political project. It is no longer politically viable to plan for Europeans to remain indefinitely incapable of looking after their own security. So the issue of greater autonomy is *de facto* on the table. It makes sense to plan for it seriously. Current capability limitations and political divisions mean that the approach would necessarily be pragmatic, gradual, and long-term. But as a vision it should be strategic and ambitious. That would translate into a gradually more able and autonomous Europe, more internally cooperative, and less dependent on Washington – “separable but not separate.” A stronger Europe would mean a stronger transatlantic relationship.

In short, we need a new approach to European strategic autonomy. It is illuminating to consider how far this might go over the next thirty years – 2049 marking 100 years since the Washington Treaty and 50 years since the EU Headline Goal.³ Thirty years is not an

³ [‘our fate into own hands,’ Politico](#), May 28, 2017.

3 The 1999 EU Headline Goal, agreed in NATO including by Washington, envisaged that, with a total of about 60,000 personnel the EU would be able to deploy simultaneously “long-term brigade-size stabilization operations and a high-intensity crisis management operation of several brigades and squadrons in the neighbourhood, as well as long-term naval operations, and battalion-size contributions to UN peacekeeping, while

aiming point for autonomy but a reasonable planning horizon and roughly the lifetime of a major equipment programme.

Strategic autonomy should not be envisaged as a binary term but as a spectrum, along which Europeans can move as their capabilities grow. Such a reading is also consistent with the EU Global Strategy,⁴ which calls for an “appropriate level of ambition,” except that – as we argue below – a Europe-wide approach is needed that goes beyond only EU initiatives and reaches a higher level of ambition. This is a necessary course of action, mindful of what the United States quite reasonably demands and of what the majority of European states can agree on – even if they oppose the goal of strategic independence or full autonomy.

“European strategic autonomy should either be dropped as a concept or taken seriously as a political project.”

Rather than trying to define strategic autonomy or set a fixed and quantified destination for Europe thirty years from now, it is smarter to travel purposefully in the direction of greater autonomy. On balance the effort to agree a meaningful level of ambition would be distracting and possibly counter-productive given that, at the moment, it might prove hard even to re-agree to the 1999 Headline Goal. Setting a quantified goal could impede practical progress in EU initiatives, such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF), as well as in EU-NATO relations. Instead we make a strong political case for autonomy as good for both Europe and the transatlantic relation.⁵

engaging in capacity-building and military cooperation.” See Sven Biscop, [“European strategic autonomy: the right level of ambition,” E-Sharp](#), September 2016.

4 [“Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy,”](#) June 2016.

5 A second ELN publication will discuss key building

A Sobering View of Timelines

What can be achieved in three decades is, of course, in Europeans' hands. But plainly there will not be much autonomy any time soon, given that EU member states are already stretched thin doing the lowest-end-of-the-spectrum operations of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), plus UN, NATO, and national-level operations.

The EU27 make up the second largest defence budget in the world after the United States, and Europe saw the greatest absolute increase in defence spending in 2017.⁶ But Washington still provides over 50% of NATO's assets for many capabilities essential to missions. The major European shortfalls in mission-critical areas include Air-to-Air Refuelling (AAR), Strategic Lift (air, maritime and land), Precision-Guided Munitions (PGM), readiness, Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR), Suppression of Enemy Air Defence (SEAD), Command and Control (C2), air defence, and cybersecurity. In every single one of NATO's 21 capability shortfalls it is the non-US Allies who are the most deficient, and the time it takes to overcome such major capability gaps can be measured in decades.⁷

With the European Union sticking to the lowest-common denominator, current EU answers such as PESCO are too modest to fill the Europe-US capability gap within three decades. The statistic that once Britain leaves the EU, 80% of NATO defence spending will come from non-EU allies⁸ is misleading since this counts total global US defence spending

– not just what the US devotes to NATO. But the UK will still take with it some 20-25% of total EU defence spending, and it accounts for about 40% of Europe's total defence R&D spending.⁹ It is thus hard to imagine real rather than rhetorical European strategic autonomy without British involvement.

“Current EU answers such as PESCO are too modest to fill the Europe-US capability gap within three decades.”

Some might argue that circumstances will change so much in the next decades that we should not take the capability requirements of yesterday or today as a reference point when planning for the future. But over a thirty-year timespan, and given their volatile neighbourhood, it would be foolish for Europeans to believe that they will not have to deal with either a collective defence or a demanding crisis management situation.

Because of the severity of state-level threats, European autonomy in collective defence looks unachievable for the 2049 horizon. According to NATO estimates, even if European Allies do all that is asked of them, by the mid-2030s they will still depend on the US for over one third of the military capabilities required to defend Europe.¹⁰ Moreover, autonomy in collective defence would be too controversial and polarizing a goal for it to generate targets and meaningful results.

The pace of change on defence issues in the European Union over the last 18 months has been impressive, and the EU will most likely provide more surprises in the next thirty years. But for European autonomy to encompass *full* rapid response to suddenly

blocks in four strands of capability-building (addressing military readiness, filling key capability gaps, fostering strategic convergence, and preparing for next generation threats) and provide a roadmap towards more European strategic autonomy.

6 “European defence spending: the new consensus,” *IJSS*, February 15, 2018.

7 Interview with a NATO official.

8 Laurence Norman and Julian E. Barnes, “NATO Pushes EU to Work with Allies for Security,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 20, 2018.

9 “Prime Minister Theresa May’s speech at the 2018 Munich Security Conference,” February 17, 2018.

10 Sir Adam Thomson, “Security Autonomy for Europe?,” *European Leadership Network*, April 7, 2017.

erupting crises in thirty years would be a real stretch.¹¹ Especially when the EU is still neither reaching its 1999 level of ambition nor deploying its battlegroups – operational since 2007. Moreover, focusing all their energy on achieving full rapid response capacity would distract Europeans from meeting their NATO obligations to do more on collective defence. It is nevertheless perfectly realistic for Europeans to aim gradually but ambitiously to raise the scale and scope for their autonomous projection of force on the NATO-EU periphery.

Whether the two sides of the Atlantic like it or not, the United States will still be the guarantor of Europe's collective defence and an important part of its security landscape when NATO turns 100. The US should not have to be the protector of Europe long-term, but "post-Atlanticists" radically underestimate current European military dependence on the US and greatly idealise the EU's cohesion and capabilities.¹² If the Americans simply upped sticks and left Europeans to get on with it, it is not just that Europeans could not do everything that NATO currently plans on collective defence and crisis management but that they could do almost none of it.

Rethinking the Transatlantic Relationship

Inevitably, strategic autonomy will be measured by how much Europeans can do without the United States. But separation from the US should not be the goal. Even when more capable of looking after themselves, Europeans will have every reason to want to act alongside the United States out of mutual interest in protecting the Euro-Atlantic community. This does not preclude deciding

to move towards a higher level of strategic autonomy from the US at a later stage, but it is not what Europe should plan for *ab initio*.

The sobering timeline for autonomy that we foresee leaves plenty of time and space for the two sides of the Atlantic to adjust their relationship as Europe gradually assumes more responsibilities in parallel to growing capabilities. Such a process might be accelerated by US withdrawal from Europe's defence or US disinterest or inability to participate in a particular operation; a crisis which shows Europe's inability to act effectively and thus shocks Europeans into action; or the emergence of a vanguard group pushing for more autonomy "ahead of schedule." But the United States is also perfectly capable of pivoting to Asia while remaining engaged in Europe.

And indeed the fundamentals of the transatlantic relation, although expressed by the Trump Administration in a more transactional way, have not changed that much so far. At least in the short term, the narrative of US withdrawal from Europe should not be exaggerated: the US military presence in Europe has recently been enhanced both through NATO and the US European Deterrence Initiative (EDI).¹³ Moreover, working towards more strategic autonomy should not be a purely reactive decision. Brexit and Trump merely gave Europeans incentives to act upon what they already knew and what previous US administrations were already asking for.

A change of mindset is needed on both sides of the Atlantic. With NATO welcoming current EU defence initiatives, these would benefit from warmer political support in Washington. Recent US scepticism and criticisms¹⁴ seem

11 French operations in Africa and various counter-terrorist operations show that some European states can already do some crisis response but this is still small-scale.

12 Hans Kundnani and Jana Puglierin, "Atlanticist and 'Post-Atlanticist' Wishful Thinking," *The German Marshall Fund of the United States*, January 3, 2018.

13 The administrations of both Barack Obama and Donald Trump have increased funding for the EDI, for increased US military exercises and training in Europe: US\$3.4 billion in 2017, up to US\$4.8 billion in 2018, and a planned figure of US\$6.5 billion in 2019. See Justyna Gotkowska, "The Trouble with PESCO. The mirages of European defence," OSW, March 1, 2018, p.17.

14 "Pentagon fires warning shot to EU over NATO uni-

to stem mostly from misunderstandings about EU plans and commercial worries.¹⁵ To be sure, the balance of autonomy and interdependence in European and US defence industry is always going to be vexed. Issues such as the role of third countries in new EU initiatives, EU capability prioritisation, and the alignment of EU-NATO procurement processes need to be discussed further. And in the design and pursuit of any European strategic autonomy it will clearly make sense for the United States and NATO to be closely consulted politically and militarily. Washington has already indicated that it expects a “robust involvement” of NATO and non-EU allies in EU defence initiatives.¹⁶

“A change of mindset is needed on both sides of the Atlantic.”

But the US has to accept that it cannot have it both ways. Greater European military capability, including defence industrial capability, should help sustain transatlantic trust, not undermine it. But it will progressively entail doing things differently, including changes at NATO. It is politically unrealistic to suppose that Europe would become increasingly able to look after its own security while at the same time becoming increasingly dependent on US R&D and US defence equipment.

Progress will be made considerably easier if Washington plays a constructive role and publicly supports stronger EU efforts in defence.¹⁷ The fear of alienating the US and weakening transatlantic bonds keeps many

¹⁵ [ty,” The Financial Times](#), February 14, 2018.

¹⁵ Brooks Tigner, “[Deconstructing PESCO: Washington’s Apparent, Actual, and Misplaced Fears about European Defense Plans](#),” *Atlantic Council*, February 26, 2018.

¹⁶ Andrea Shalal, “[US seeks ‘robust involvement’ in EU defence pact – sources](#),” *Reuters*, February 27, 2018.

¹⁷ Ronja Kempin and Barbara Kunz, “[Washington should help Europe achieve ‘strategic autonomy’, not fight it](#),” *War on the Rocks*, April 12, 2018.

Europeans from truly investing political will and effort into building a more autonomous Europe. Stronger support from Washington would also make it harder for some Europeans to use American skepticism to justify not spending enough on defence and not looking after their own collective security. If both sides of the Atlantic were to take European strategic autonomy seriously, this would provide the necessary political and conceptual framework to get things started.

A Europe-wide Approach

Strategic autonomy does not have to mean that we undertake all operations under the same flag. EU and NATO initiatives, as well as bilateral, multilateral, and regional ones should be seen as parts of a single coherent autonomy project that benefits Europeans, NATO, the EU, EU-NATO relations, and transatlantic relations. Previous approaches to strategic autonomy have fallen short because they either provided a vision for one institution only – such as the EU Global Strategy – or presented largely rhetorical declarations about European independence from the US and NATO – for example, the commonly cited bogeyman of a “European army.”

Certainly a sustained, multi-strand, decades-long drive towards greater autonomy would be likely to have the EU at its political heart. EU institutions would need to be squarely behind such a project, and a lot of the political energy and solidarity necessary for strategic autonomy will come from the EU. But, as demonstrated above, that would not be enough. For European strategic autonomy to achieve the scale and scope to become increasingly meaningful on rapid intensive crisis response and eventually collective defence, we need stronger initiatives and a higher level of ambition. This will not be achieved by relying solely on the EU or on the Franco-German motor¹⁸ but will also require

¹⁸ Alice Billon-Galland, “[A Franco-German motor for](#)

American support and the involvement of non-EU Europeans through NATO. NATO has been an essential part of the solidarity proposition in Europe and is likely to remain a political centre of gravity for the next thirty years.

“Strategic autonomy does not have to mean that we undertake all operations under the same flag.”

Finally, autonomy requires leadership. Institutions will play a key role but more autonomy is much more likely to be the result of state-driven leadership, with a focus on the Franco-British-German triangle. It will require the political weight, diplomatic engagement, and commitment to stronger military capabilities that can only come from a limited number of European states. This points towards a vanguard approach. Franco-British collaboration holds much potential. Leadership by key capitals would bring in a further tier of European states – most likely the ones joining President Macron’s European Intervention Initiative (EII)¹⁹ such as Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Estonia, but with the addition of Poland.

Wanted: A Roadmap for the Next Thirty Years

Superficially, it is easy to describe what is wanted. More European engagement should translate into Europeans contributing their fair share to transatlantic burden-sharing for the security of their own continent and acting on their own in smaller theatres of operations. Moving past the important but one-dimensional 2% goal for NATO defence spending, during the next 30 years Europeans

[Europe’s defence? Takeways from the ELN-BDI side event at the 2018 Munich Security Conference,](#) *European Leadership Network*, February 26, 2018.

¹⁹ Paul Taylor, [“Emmanuel Macron’s coalition of the willing,”](#) *Politico*, May 2, 2018.

should develop greater capabilities to act and come to a greater agreement as to when and how to act. These two latter processes are inseparable and will either grow together or die together, as having capabilities but not agreeing to use them is as useless as wanting to act but lacking the equipment to do so.

But in fact describing the roadmap to greater strategic autonomy is not so simple. We have already pointed to the potential tensions between pursuing stronger European crisis response capabilities and making a greater contribution to collective defence. And we have noted the potentially acutely political transatlantic issues surrounding “autonomy” in defence industry. There are also important balances to be struck between simply making what Europe has already got more available and making it all more modern; between increasing the readiness²⁰ of existing national capabilities and driving up European harmonisation and integration; and between different options for spending additional defence funds across readiness, equipment, other aspects of capability such as training and stocks maintenance, and R&D. Moreover, although striking the balance is difficult and highly political, common planning is essential and joint NATO-EU planning is highly desirable.

Accustomed though NATO, the EU, and national governments are to fixing a headline goal and working towards it – and even though this can sometimes be politically mobilising – we judge that the attempt to define now what European strategic autonomy should mean by, say, 2049 would be more distracting and counter-productive than useful. It would risk

²⁰ We emphasize readiness because it has been shown that simply making existing equipment available is the fastest and most cost-effective way to increase military capabilities. For most platforms an increase in availability by 20 to 30% is possible without any significant increase in costs. See McKinsey&Company and the Munich Security Conference, [“More European, More Connected and More Capable: Building the European Armed Forces of the Future,”](#) November 2017, p.30.

another acrimonious and time-consuming debate inside the EU, between the EU and NATO, as well as across the Atlantic, and without any guarantee of meaningful result.

“Having capabilities but not agreeing to use them is as useless as wanting to act but lacking the equipment to do so.”

We should instead step away from long-term ideological and geopolitical differences and focus on what all agree needs to be done in the short and medium term. Our next policy paper will argue that Europeans should embark today on four complementary paths towards more strategic autonomy: addressing readiness, filling key capability gaps, fostering strategic convergence, and preparing for next-generation threats. This approach, concentrating on key building blocks for autonomy rather than on a specific but distant goal, is better tuned to the realities of diverse European positions. Moreover, it leaves room to accommodate the strategic, technological, and geo-political shifts of the next thirty years.

Conclusion

Europeans need to get more serious about their own security today, as they have a long road ahead of them. The scale of European capability shortfalls and dependence is such that long timelines for progress towards greater autonomy would be needed even if European decision-making was not so conflicted and European defence industry so fragmented. Europeans may not like Mr Trump but they still need him and his successors for the security on which their prosperity depends. Close EU-NATO collaboration and close US association are necessary, but a change of mindsets is also required on both sides of the Atlantic.

The difficulties on the road should not discredit the direction of travel. A new, more serious approach to European strategic autonomy would be a long-term effort, with gradual moves towards higher levels of autonomy. It would depend on the progressive development of better European capabilities along several parallel tracks and on progressive agreement to increasingly ambitious goals. It assumes leadership by major European states but also calls for the building of an even stronger, more collaborative partnership between the EU and NATO as institutions – something that now looks entirely possible.

The July NATO summit will be an opportunity to address these challenges and prepare for the decades to come. As the new US approach to Europe is more clearly about “interests first,” Europeans have an opening and an incentive to define and advance their own interests jointly and discuss with Washington how more autonomy would benefit the Euro-Atlantic community.