

13/2021

24 de marzo de 2021

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European Strategic Autonomy: neither with you, nor without you

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European Strategic Autonomy: neither with you, nor without you

Abstract:

The enormous geopolitical changes that have been taking place on the international scene in recent decades have radically affect the role of the European Union in the new global scenario. And not only regarding the specific aspects of its Security and Defence, but also its role as an actor in this panorama. An actor who wants to be relevant and who wants to express itself with its own voice in defence of its interests.

The Union's Strategic Autonomy can no longer be considered exclusively in terms of military capabilities. The complexity of the challenges posed by the new commercial and technological powers, together with their geopolitical challenges, force a broadening of focus. European ambition cannot be limited to a mere accompaniment to the powerful ally on the other side of the Atlantic. But of course, who said this is going to be easy?

Keywords:

Strategic Autonomy, global actor, European Security, Strategic Compass.

How to cite this document:

DACOBÁ CERVIÑO, Francisco José. *European Strategic Autonomy: neither with you, nor without you*. IEEE Analysis Paper 13/2021.

http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2021/DIEEEA13_2021_FRANDAC_Autonomia_ENG.pdf and/or [bie³ link](#) (accessed on day/month/year)

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Autonomía Estratégica Europea: ni contigo, ni sin ti...

Resumen:

Los enormes cambios geopolíticos que se han vivido en el panorama internacional en las últimas décadas no podían dejar de afectar, radicalmente, a la Unión Europea en el nuevo escenario global. Y no solo en lo que a los aspectos concretos de su Seguridad y Defensa se refiere, sino también a su papel como un actor más en dicho panorama. Pero un actor que quiere ser relevante y que quiere expresarse con una voz propia en defensa de sus intereses.

La Autonomía Estratégica de la Unión ya no ha de ser considerada exclusivamente en términos de capacidades militares. La complejidad de los retos que plantean las nuevas potencias comerciales y tecnológicas, así como sus desafíos geopolíticos, obligan a ampliar el foco. La ambición europea no puede limitarse a un mero acompañamiento al poderoso aliado del otro lado del Atlántico. Pero... ¿quién dijo que esto iba a ser fácil?

Palabras clave:

Autonomía Estratégica, actor global, seguridad europea, agenda estratégica.

"Neither with you, nor without you
have my ills a remedy;
with you, because you kill me,
without you, because I die"

Anonymous. Attributed to A. Machado

Introduction

The concept of Strategic Autonomy, referring to the European Union, had been used sporadically until it was definitively enshrined in the European Union Global Strategy¹ in 2016. Since then, it has been repeated time and again by European authorities, especially since the new Commission took office, and by various leaders of member states. However, this abundance of mentions has not been accompanied by the necessary unanimity in its definition and scope within the EU-27, nor by the enthusiasm for its acceptance by the Union's leading ally, the United States. Originally confined to the Common Security and Defence Policy, the dizzying evolution of the global landscape invites us to broaden the horizon to all international relations: trade, financial, technological, cultural, diplomatic and military.



Figure 1. Flag of the European Union and the US.

¹ 'The Strategy nurtures the ambition of strategic autonomy for the European Union. This is necessary to promote the common interests of our citizens, as well as our principles and values. Available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_es_.pdf

Several factors shape the global playing field. In an order that is now multipolar, Europe cannot be satisfied with docilely following US initiatives, but must seek its own seat at the table of global actors, with its shortcomings and also its strengths. This is what President Von der Leyen acknowledged when she identified a geopolitical European Commission as one of her priorities². Hence, the initial nature of the concept, limited to little more than the strictly 'military', has been largely superseded.

Beyond its health consequences, the COVID-19 pandemic is having serious economic and social repercussions that affect different countries and regions unevenly. Europe is among the worst affected territories and lags behind China's early recovery and the expected recovery in the United States. In the far-flung Asia-Pacific region, not only China has successfully rebounded from the crisis; Japan, South Korea and Taiwan have also done better and stand out as powers that outperform the EU in a number of cutting-edge technologies. Some of the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) or Indonesia are emerging as powerful global trade players. In such a pressing scenario, a fragmented Europe is a sure losing horse.

The change in the US Administration has been greeted in European capitals with undisguised optimism, perhaps a little too much³. Snubs to NATO and the EU, threats of US withdrawal from the European continent, deteriorating transatlantic ties and disproportionate tariffs are now giving way to calls for a reunion from President Biden. "America's back! Diplomacy's back!⁴ NATO's back!⁵" are statements repeated by the new head of the White House, most recently at the telematic 2021 Munich Security Conference. A commitment to a revived and revitalised multilateralism is fully in line with the European position. But the good vibes should not obscure the fact that, in other equally important respects, the new president has spoken in terms vividly reminiscent of his predecessor. In the aforementioned Munich speech, Biden called for intense strategic competition with China and accused Russia of seeking to undermine the European and

² Ursula von der Leyen has pledged to lead a 'geopolitical Commission', 28 January 2020. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI\(2020\)646148](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI(2020)646148)

³ In this sense, see PONTIJAS CALDERÓN, José Luis. *New Administration: new foreign policy for United States?* IEEE Analysis Paper 28/2020. Available at: http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2020/DIEEEA28_2020JOSPON_EEUU.pdf

⁴ 'America is back. Diplomacy is back at the center of our foreign policy', 4 February 2021. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-america-place-in-the-world/>

⁵ rtve: US President Joe Biden declared on Friday that the "transatlantic alliance" between the United States and Europe "is back", 19 February 2021. Available at: <https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20210219/biden-alianza-transatlantica-europa-eeuu-vuelve/2077629.shtml>

transatlantic project⁶. These words rung out in European offices as an explicit demand to close ranks with Washington vis-à-vis Beijing and Moscow.

It is not news to note that, in this global scenario so demanding for Europe in terms of the challenges it poses, and despite the change of tone in the United States, the Union suffers from a persistent lack of internal cohesion. It is difficult to find unanimous agreement among the partners on any issue. Disagreements are guaranteed both in terms of security and defence (Atlanticist vs. pro-European, Eastern vs. Southern countries), as well as in relations with other major powers (Russia, China and even Turkey) and the position to adopt in the geographically closest conflicts (Syria, Libya, Sahel, Mediterranean, Middle East, Iran, etc.).

NATO, yes; NATO... no?

European security architecture is a concept that was not debated at all during the long decades of the Cold War. It was naturally assumed that NATO, and the United States at its head, was a more than sufficient and unique guarantee of the continent's security. In this scenario, European countries could concentrate their efforts on reconstruction and recovery from the disasters caused by the war and on building a strong welfare state for their citizens⁷. This began to change, at first somewhat diffusely, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the progressive shift of the world's geopolitical centre of gravity from Europe to the Asia-Pacific region, via the Middle East beforehand. President Trump's extremely critical attitude towards the Alliance made it clear that the golden days of the transatlantic relationship are now a thing of the past. It is true that the new US Administration is radically modifying the message, shifting from the previous confrontation to a forceful call to rebuild bridges between the two sides of the ocean, but it would be unrealistic to expect the United States to revise geopolitical priorities, with a view to the Pacific, that are agreed by both parties on Capitol Hill.

It is comforting to see fear of a US withdrawal from NATO dissipating; and we can assume that none of the allies are considering it any more. But the damage to the Alliance's

⁶ Statement by President Biden to the Munich Security Conference (virtual), 19 February 2021. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cay9FII2EJA>

⁷ A detailed development of European Security and Defence developments in: DACOBA CERVIÑO, Francisco J. *Europe has no takers*. IEEE Analysis Paper 12/2020. Available at: http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2020/DIEEEA12_2020FRADAC_Europa.pdf

cohesion and credibility is done. Future 'Trump-inspired' governments taking back the reins of this relationship and returning it to where Trump left it cannot be ruled out. And, in any case, we cannot live under the illusion that the interests of both the United States and the European Union will always and completely coincide in such a way as to avoid any kind of friction. In other words, NATO yes, of course, but... we'll have to think about it a bit. This is recognised even by someone as Atlanticist as Secretary General Stoltenberg, who on 1 December presented the report NATO 2030: United for a New Era. Among its hundred or so recommendations, it is worth highlighting the following: 'NATO and the EU should seek to reinvigorate trust and understanding at the highest levels. At the next NATO Summit or the next available opportunity, it would be useful for NATO and EU Heads of State and Government to meet in a special formal session to review the current state of the relation-ship and examine areas for greater cooperation'⁸.

The dilemma, therefore, is not a choice between 'NATO yes' or 'NATO no'. That is not the point. What is at stake, and here there seems to be unanimity, is to redesign the transatlantic bond. A lot has happened in the world since the current Strategic Concept was adopted in 2010. Unanimity disappears, however, when it comes to specifying what the *aggiornamento* of the Alliance should consist of: the devil is, once again, in the detail⁹.

Since we cannot ignore reality nor renounce the necessary evolution (not revolution), perhaps it is time to narrow the playing field, to discard extreme positions. Despite the dismal *Brexit*, no one expects a transatlantic divorce, or even an amicable separation. The wealth of shared values is more relevant than ever in the face of the assertiveness of powers are questioning the current international order. Despite legitimate disagreements, there is also broad agreement on common interests and objectives. On the other hand, merely following of US initiatives without criticism cannot be a sensible option either. It is therefore necessary to move towards European Strategic Autonomy and the revitalisation of the Atlantic Alliance... simultaneously.

An important point of consensus, which should allay suspicions in Member States on the eastern flank of the Union, is the unanimous recognition that Security within Allied borders

⁸ NATO 2030: United for a New Era. Available at: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf

⁹ PONTIJAS CALDERÓN, José Luis. *A new strategic concept for NATO*. IEEE Analysis Paper 40/2020. Available at: http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2020/DIEEEA40_2020JOSPON_estrategiaOT

is based on the undisputed validity of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty and full US involvement. This past February, a virtual meeting of European Union leaders on security and defence was held with the notable presence of Secretary General Stoltenberg, precisely to demonstrate in the best possible way the strength of the relationship between the two organisations. The emphasis of the meeting was on the close links of European military policy to NATO and on making clear that the pursuit of Strategic Autonomy will not come at the price of weakening the Alliance¹⁰. The bluntness of this statement is compatible with the purpose of strengthening the Union in the field of Security and Defence¹¹... although Stoltenberg himself does not see it that way¹². This is the direction of the work being carried out under the initiative known as the¹³ 'Strategic Compass', which aims to identify threats to European security and determine capabilities needed to guarantee it. The concerns addresses in this document include crisis and conflict management, as well as destabilisation of the regional environment.

¹⁰ 'The European Union links NATO to developing its military policy', *ABC*, 27 February 2021. Available at: https://www.abc.es/internacional/abci-vincula-otan-desarrollo-politica-militar-202102262204_noticia.html

¹¹ 'European Council. Strengthening the European Union in the field of Security and Defence', *DSN*, 5 March 2021. Available at: <https://www.dsn.gob.es/ca/actualidad/sala-prensa/consejo-europeo-fortalecer-uni%C3%B3n-europea-%C3%A1mbito-seguridad-defensa>

¹² 'Le secrétaire général de l'Otan critique l'idée d'autonomie stratégique européenne', *OPEX360*, 5 March 2021. Available at: <http://www.opex360.com/2021/03/05/le-secretaire-general-de-lotan-critique-lidee-dautonomie-strategique-europeenne/>

¹³ European Council. *A new Strategic Agenda. 2019-2024*. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39964/a-new-strategic-agenda-2019-2024-es.pdf>



#EUDefence

The EU is facing new and increasing threats and challenges. To counter them, protect its citizens, and enhance its strategic autonomy to become a stronger global partner, the EU needs to define what kind of security and defence actor it wants to be.

ADDRESSING THREATS TO THE EU'S SECURITY

As a first step to determine the direction of travel, the EU has conducted for the first time a comprehensive analysis on key threats and challenges to Europe, including:



Global and regional threats



Conflicts in our neighbourhood



Challenges by state actors



Threats by non-state actors

The Threat Analysis is a classified intelligence report identifying key trends:

- Global level:** slowdown of globalisation, growing economic rivalry between global powers, climate change and competition for resources, migratory pressures, and threats to the multilateral system.
- Regional level:** regional instability, conflict, state fragility, inter-state tensions, external influences, destabilising impact of non-state actors.
- Threats against the EU:** state and non-state actors targeting the EU with hybrid tools, including disruptive technologies, disinformation, and other non-military sources of influence; terrorist threat.

DEVELOPING A STRATEGIC COMPASS TO GUIDE OUR ACTIONS

The Strategic Compass will help strengthen a common European security and defence culture and help define the right objectives and concrete goals for our policies.

The Strategic Compass will address four different, inter-linked areas:



Crisis management missions



Resilience



Capabilities and Instruments



Working with partners



Figure 2. European Union Strategic Agenda. Source. <https://euagenda.eu/publications/towards-a-strategic-compass>

Europe cannot, and will not, do without its greatest ally; at the same time, the United States will benefit from a strong and mutually attuned European Union to address shared challenges. Based on this consensus, a certain 'division of labour' can be established¹⁴. A more credible EU deterrent to its immediate neighbour, Russia, with assured US backing, could take on a greater role in the European continental theatre. This would allow the US to focus on the region that concerns it most, the Indo-Pacific, where European military presence is admittedly secondary. The true task, however, will be to align these options acceptably and seek general acquiescence.

This reinforced European *hard power*, in terms of both military capabilities and greater coordination in the use of force, would allow the Union to take charge, in the words of High Representative Borrell, of its immediate neighbourhood¹⁵. It is not for nothing that a plethora of armed conflicts are active or dormant, from the coasts of the Gulf of Guinea, the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, the Middle East and the Caucasus, to the heart of Europe: the Balkans, Ukraine and Belarus. The bad news is that increased military presence in any of these scenarios is unlikely to command the unanimity of the 27, and will have to be reduced to a case-by-case intervention *of the willing*, as is currently the case in the Sahel with French impetus.

There should be fewer obstacles to reaching agreement on issues of mutual interest: nuclear proliferation, cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns, hybrid threats, disaster response, organised crime, and transnational terrorism. Persistent disagreement over defence spending, the oft-demanded 2 per cent of GDP, while not close to being reached, is gradually being resolved... by most allies.

The idyllic division of labour between the two sides of the Atlantic clashes, however, with very different interests and points of view on either side of the ocean. America's understandable concern about the impressive rearmament and modernisation of China's People's Liberation Army¹⁶, has led the US to push NATO to *go global*. But while Chinese

¹⁴ DÍAZ RODRÍGUEZ, Joel. *NATO after the 1970s: challenges and redefining the alliance*. IEEE Framework Document 08/2020. Available at: http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_marco/2020/DIEEEM08_2020JOEDIA_OTAN70.pdf

¹⁵ J. Borrell: "We will not be credible in our ambition to be a geopolitical actor, if we are not capable of solving the problems of our immediate neighbourhood", 8 October 2019. Available at: <https://analytik.es/debate/josep-borrell-jefe-diplomacia-europa/>

¹⁶ 'China slightly increases military budget for 2021 (+6.8%)', *Infobae*, 5 March 2021. Available at: <https://www.infobae.com/america/agencias/2021/03/05/china-aumenta-ligeramente-presupuesto-militar-para-2021-68/>

military penetration in Africa¹⁷ is also of concern in Brussels, the nature of this challenge for Europeans is very different from that felt by the United States in the distant, for us, East and South China Seas. Moreover, Russia is, to an even greater extent, a factor of widespread dissent within and outside the Union. According to the *NATO 2030* report, Russia "is the main military threat to NATO"¹⁸ which, while true, is interpreted with greater urgency in Eastern Europe than in the South. President Biden, again at the Munich Conference, aligns himself more clearly with the former¹⁹. Without underestimating Russia's assertiveness, some Member States prefer to seek avenues of negotiation that allow them to combine pressure on the Kremlin with essential trade relations, especially in energy.

Another recurrent argument for objecting to the resolute move towards consolidating greater Strategic Defence Autonomy is that duplication and redundant spending between NATO and the EU should be avoided. Initiatives such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), financial allocation through the European Defence Fund (EDF) or the 'military operations headquarters' (MPCC) are seen in Washington as a threat to its own defence industry and as unnecessary waste by some allies. Perhaps, but there is a price to be paid if the effort in favour of European autonomy is not to meet the same fate as similar initiatives in the past.

Beyond (very) hard power

The fact that the European Union has greater specific weight in the area of its own Security and Defence, as we have just seen, is inextricably linked to an equivalent presence in all areas of international relations. The course of confrontation between the two giants—China and the United States—for economic and technological primacy puts the other participants in the multipolar order in the position of seeking their own profile, with all the risks that this entails of snubbing one of the two giants; or aligning themselves with one, which is probably even worse. This dilemma is most evident, for example,

¹⁷ BAQUÉS, J. 'The keys to Chinese presence in Djibouti', *Global Strategy*, 23 November 2019. Available at: <https://global-strategy.org/las-claves-de-la-presencia-china-en-yibuti/>

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ J. Biden: "The Kremlin attacks our democracies and uses corruption as a weapon to undermine our system of government", 19 February 2021. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/translations/spanish/declaraciones-del-presidente-biden-en-la-conferencia-virtual-de-seguridad-de-munich-2021/>

among the countries of Southeast Asia, which are literally in the middle of the conflict. Although not as directly concerned geographically, the EU is also forced to position itself in the economic and technological, as well as geopolitical, war between Chinese and Americans. As if these tensions were not enough, the Union must also manage closer, and no less worrying, relations with its inevitable neighbour, Russia.

Initial indications from Washington contain equal parts desires for collaboration and better relations, along with urgent calls to stand shoulder to shoulder with revisionist powers²⁰. This combination of fine words and warnings for Europe to be on the right side of the trench are not received with enthusiasm in the capitals of the old continent, which prefer to set transatlantic agendas for China and Russia in which, unlike Biden, red lines are nuanced, at least as long as possible²¹.

The more sceptical will take a dim view of some of the claims that are becoming widespread, with distinguished European leaders now using the terms Strategic Autonomy and Strategic Sovereignty interchangeably. "Sovereignty!" This is not an anecdotal *slip of the tongue*, but is part of the official language in, for example, the two large EU Member States, France and Germany. Chancellor Merkel and President Macron agreed to use the term 'sovereignty' repeatedly in a recent video conference²². In similar words, new German CDU leader Armin Laschet stated that " Strategic Sovereignty (of the EU) is a guarantee of capacity to act and self-assertion... it is also a guarantee of freedom of choice in times of crisis"²³.

Conclusions

Autonomy or sovereignty, the inevitability of a greater EU global presence seems beyond dispute, despite Stoltenberg's reticence and American gestures of disapproval²⁴. It will be

²⁰ 'Biden: "Let's show our grandchildren that democracy works"', *ABC*, 21 February 2021. Available at: https://www.abc.es/internacional/abci-biden-demostremos-nuestros-nietos-democracia-funciona-202102200107_noticia.html

²¹ Ibidem.

²² 'Merkel wants an EU equidistant between the US and China', *ABC*, 5 February 2021. Available at: https://www.abc.es/internacional/abci-merkel-quiere-equidistante-entre-eeuu-y-china-202102051911_noticia.html

²³ *Política Exterior*, no. 199, January 2021. Available at: <https://www.politicaexterior.com/articulo/relaciones-transatlanticas-y-poder-difuso/>

²⁴ Letter from the US Deputy Secretary of Defence expressing strong disagreement with European capability development initiatives, PESCO, EDF... 1 May 2019. Available at: file:///C:/Users/frand/Downloads/Ellen_Lord_Mogherini.pdf

very difficult, however, to find the necessary consensus within the Union itself to establish the ultimate scope of this legitimate ambition. And perhaps even more difficult will be to garner necessary support outside its borders, especially in the United States, and to overcome the sticks that certain adversary powers will put in the wheels of the European machine. But the unbridled competitiveness, the *great power competition*, in this multipolar international order in which we find ourselves leaves no other reasonable alternative.

Europe may be one of the *great powers*, to use Joschka Fisher's prediction²⁵, but it will, in any case, be a different power. More active than usual in the use of its *hard power*, integrating it into the unquestioned transatlantic security framework and focusing, as a complementary task, on managing the difficult immediate geographical environment. At the same time, in line with its traditional image as a friendly power, the European Union will promote, with a clear vocation of world leadership, policies on energy transition, respect for the environment, the welfare state and rules-based global governance. Europe will not stop being Venus, but at the same time it wants to be Mars. Schizophrenia? No, more like a crash landing in the real world.

The road will be long and winding. Endogenous and external difficulties cannot be ignored or underestimated, but achieving broad Strategic Autonomy (or Sovereignty?) of the European Union is an objective as elusive as it is inalienable, which will not solve all our problems as if by magic, but without which our problems will only multiply... European Autonomy/Strategic Sovereignty: "neither with you, nor without you, are my ills remedied; with you because you kill me, without you, because I die".

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²⁵ FISHER, J. 'What kind of great power can Europe become?', *New Europe*, 31 January 2020. Available at: <https://www.neweurope.eu/article/what-kind-of-great-power-can-europe-become/>