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Policy Brief

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European strategic autonomy: Going it alone?

With the boost that has been given to the EU's defence policy, some of the St. Malo reflexes have reoccurred in Washington. Mostly, there are some misgivings in the United States about the exact meaning of 'European strategic autonomy', as it featured in the 2016 EU Global Strategy. But also in Europe, it is not clear what strategic autonomy means. In light of the increasing uncertainty among the EU and European NATO-members about the solidity of the American security guarantees, strategic autonomy gains a new quality. If Europe were forced 'to go it alone', what would that take, both in terms of conventional and nuclear capabilities? This Policy Brief concludes that European countries face a dilemma: they have to simultaneously invest in their strategic autonomy and in keeping the United States committed to their security.

Introduction[1]

Security and defence policy in the EU has long been surrounded by a sense of disillusionment and a lack of energy. But in the past few years wake-up call after wake-up call have breathed new life into the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). In response to rising threat levels, Russia's annexation of Crimea, mounting pressure by the United States on Europe to step up its defence efforts and increasing doubts sparked by the Trump administration about the US´ willingness to remain the backbone of European security, the EU has revitalised its ambition of strategic autonomy. The past year alone saw the birth of the European Defence Fund (EDF), Permanent Structured Cooperation (Pesco) and the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD). But if Europeans thought that their initiatives would be met with nothing but applause in Washington, they should have thought twice. The revitalisation of EU security and defence saw the simultaneous resurgence of concerns about its effects on the transatlantic bond, on defence industrial protectionism and cooperation within NATO. In particular the EU´s ambition as it was phrased in the EU's Global Strategy to become strategically autonomous has raised hackles. This policy brief takes a closer look at the different notions of strategic autonomy, its reception across the Atlantic, what it actually means in terms of Europe's

1 The author is grateful for Anne Bakker's contribution and Anne Giesbers' help with background research. The former is a Research Fellow and the latter a Research Assistant at Clingendael.

level of ambition and its nuclear umbrella, and the implications of strategic autonomy for transatlantic security cooperation.

St. Malo revisited?

By embracing strategic autonomy as its new ambition in the EU Global Strategy, the EU went a step up from a commitment to autonomous action that it had made twenty years ago.[2] From the outset this ambition, and the Common Security and Defence Policy that resulted therefrom, was viewed with suspicion from across the Atlantic.[3] The then Secretary of State Madeleine Albright hesitantly "welcomed" Europe's efforts, but simultaneously warned against what has become known as 'the 3 Ds': the *decoupling* of European decision-making from decision-making in the Alliance; the *duplication* by European security and defence efforts of efforts undertaken within NATO; and EU *discrimination* against European NATO members that were not part of the EU. This conditional approach has over time made way for a generally more positive US attitude towards the CSDP. However, this cautious support now seems to be wavering as the revival of the EU defence project has seen a – albeit less pronounced – return of concerns over decoupling, duplication and discrimination. This '3 D-redux' came into view at this year's Munich Security Conference, where NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg warned that "with opportunity comes risk. The risk of weakening the transatlantic bond, the risk of duplicating what NATO is already doing and the risk of discriminating against non-EU members of the NATO Alliance. These risks must be avoided. The reality is the European Union cannot protect Europe by itself."[4]

Stoltenberg's warning reflected the views of a group of US policymakers and experts who, over the years, have remained sceptical concerning European defence efforts. These 'doubters' are wary that a renewed ambition for European strategic autonomy might undermine the transatlantic bond. While they support more European defence efforts, they do so only insofar as the new initiatives do not challenge the United States or NATO and will add actual capabilities to the transatlantic force catalogue, an approach that is reminiscent of Secretary Albright's '3 Ds'. Katie Wheelbarger, the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, for example commented at the Munich Security Conference that: "We are supportive of it, as long as [they are] complementary to and not distracting from NATO's activities and requirements. […] We don't want to see EU efforts pulling requirements or forces away from NATO and into the EU".[5] In a similar vein the US Ambassador to NATO, Kay Bailey Hutchison, expressed concerns about the European Defence Fund becoming a "protectionist vehicle for the EU" which could "splinter the strong security alliance that we have".[6]

In addition to the 'doubters', roughly three other sets of responses can be discerned in the US debate on European strategic

2 At the 1998 Franco-British Summit at St. Malo, the UK and France agreed that the EU should "have the capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces, the means to decide to use them, and a readiness to do so, in order to respond to international crises". This ambition was subsequently embraced by all EU member states at the Cologne European Council. It could be argued that 'autonomous action' is not as encompassing as 'strategic autonomy', although the ability to act independently from others seems to imply that they are almost synonymous.

3 For an overview of the US debate on the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) up until 2014, see: Jolyon Howorth, 'Selling it to Uncle Sam… CSDP and Transatlantic Relations', *Security and Defence Policy in the European Union*, Palgrave, June 2014, p. 109-143.

4 Speech by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the Munich Security Conference, 16 February 2018, available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_152209.htm.

5 Steven Erlanger, "U.S. Revives Concerns About European Defense Plans, Rattling NATO Allies", *The New York Times*, 18 February 2018, available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/18/world/europe/nato-europe-us-.html.

6 Ibid.

autonomy: those of the 'devotees', the 'disbelievers' and the 'decouplers'.

- The 'devotees' are welcoming the reinvigoration of European defence. They believe that a stronger European defence will benefit, rather than harm, the US and NATO as it will lead to greater transatlantic burden-sharing. Ivo Daalder, the former US Ambassador to NATO, for example stated that the lack of US support for the newly launched European defence initiatives was a mistake and that increased European spending was "a plus for burden sharing".[7] Professor Charles Kupchan, who sees US power as overstretched and in need of support from partners, has even stated that with Trump in the White House "Europe has little choice but to look past Washington".[8] The notion of strategic autonomy is often ignored in this group, but it should be noted that some are wary about what European strategic autonomy might exactly mean and they seek clarity that it will not stand in the way of transatlantic security cooperation.
- The 'disbelievers' do not support EU strategic autonomy as they a) believe that the CSDP will remain a paper tiger and b) are convinced that a separate European defence effort will undermine NATO. This faction has become increasingly influential with the appointment of John Bolton as Trump's National Security Advisor, who has stated that "a true EU military capability – not the dream world they often live in and talk about, but if they actually got to the point of achieving something concrete – that would be a dagger pointed at the heart of NATO".[9]
- Finally, there is a group that wants to leave European security to Europe altogether. These 'decouplers' are in favour of ending US military engagements in Europe and terminating US membership of NATO. Influential International Relations scholars John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt argue, amongst other things, that "In Europe, the United States should end its military presence and turn NATO over to the Europeans. There is no good reason to keep US forces in Europe, as no country there has the capability to dominate that region."[10] This group also includes influential scholars such as Barry Posen and Andrew Bacevich.[11] President Trump also presents himself as a decoupler. Already before taking office, Trump called NATO "obsolete" and stated that European countries were "ripping off the United States" while the US was "giving them military protection and other things".[12] He called upon NATO countries to pay their fair share "or we can go it alone".[13]

While transatlantic relations have weathered many storms, it is difficult to overlook the fact that since the end of the Cold War the structural foundations of strong security cooperation have been affected. Europe striving for strategic autonomy is one of the consequences of that widening divide, as the European Union increasingly felt that it had to take care of its own security needs. This has been considerably accelerated by the Trump administration as confidence

7 Ibid.

8 Charles Kupchan, "The West Will Have to Go It Alone, Without the United States", *Foreign Policy*, 13 June 2017.

9 Quoted in John Hayward, "John Bolton: European Union Military Would Be 'Dagger Pointed at the Heart of NATO', *Breitbart.com*, 23 November 2016, available at: http://www.breitbart.com/radio/2016/11/23/bolton-eu-military-dagger-pointed-heart-nato/.

10 John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 95 (4), July/August 2016, p. 82.

11 See: Jolyon Howorth, "EU-NATO cooperation: the key to Europe's security future", *European Security*, Vol. 26 (3), 17 August 2017, p. 457.

12 Quoted in Ashley Parker, "Donald Trump Says NATO is 'Obsolete,' UN is 'Political Game'", 2 April 2016, available at: https://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2016/04/02/donald-trump-tells-crowd-hed-be-fine-if-nato-broke-up/.

13 Quoted in Anne Applebaum, 'Europe needs to start planning for a future with no US', *Washington Post*, 18 July 2018.

in the security guarantees of the United States is diminishing. Despite the United States Congress still being overwhelmingly in favour of NATO and with both US funds and troops dedicated to Europe on the rise, many in Europe see this presidency as a symptom of a changing United States. Be it a pivot to Asia, a renationalisation of its foreign and security policy, all trends in the US point away from Europe. It is clear that the group of 'devotees' to the increased EU defence efforts is not at the centre of policy making. A two-track approach emerges from here: while we have to try to preserve the transatlantic relationship and NATO as best as we can, we have to simultaneously start opting for a 'plan B'.

Strategic autonomy: what's in a name?

The notion of 'strategic autonomy' has a long history in ESDP/CSDP, although it is not always clear what is meant by the term. Strategic autonomy is generally defined as having three different dimensions: operational, political and industrial autonomy.[14] Strategic autonomy can only be attained when all three are simultaneously a reality. In the early years of ESDP, it was predominantly the operational and occasionally the industrial side of strategic autonomy that was emphasized.

At the infancy of ESDP, France and the United Kingdom mostly emphasized the side of strategic autonomy which they felt was particularly lacking: operational autonomy. After the 2016 EU Global Strategy, the dimension of strategic autonomy that receives the most attention is the defence industrial dimension: "A sustainable, innovative and competitive European defence industry is essential for Europe's strategic autonomy and for a credible CSDP". The European Commission asserted that "Europe must be able to decide and to act without depending on the capabilities of third parties. Security of supply, access to critical technologies and operational sovereignty are therefore crucial".[15]

While most European countries, in recent years, indicate that Europe must strengthen its defence, either to be a more credible security partner to the United States or to be able to act, if necessary, on its own, it is France that most clearly defines what it understands to be strategic autonomy. The term is usually avoided in debates in other European countries as it would open up a can of worms of having to clarify what it understands to be strategic autonomy. It does not, for example, feature in the German Whitebook or in any Dutch strategic documents. Poland refers to strategic autonomy mostly in a concerned manner. Former Polish Prime Minister (now Deputy Prime Minister) Beate Szydlo asserted that "We want an EU who can effectively act in case of a crisis in EU's neighborhood. However, strategic autonomy should not mean weakening of the European contribution to NATO's defense and deterrence potential."[16]

In France, strategic autonomy is understood and officially defined as the state's ability to decide and to act freely in an interdependent world. This allows French independence and sovereignty to be preserved, while strengthening the partnerships that contribute to this independence. "What remains key to French autonomy is the country's capacity to lead operations on its own and to retain

14 See: Ronja Kempin and Barbara Kunz, "France, Germany and the Quest for European Strategic Autonomy", *Notes du Cerfa* 141, December 2017, p. 10, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/ndc_141_kempin_kunz_france_germany_european_strategic_autonomy_dec_2017.pdf.

15 European Commission, July 2013, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-13-734_en.htm.

16 Quoted in, Michal Baranowski and Martin Quencez, "An Inclusive PESCO Moves Forward Despite Remaining Concerns", *GMFUS blog*, December 2017, http://www.gmfus.org/blog/2017/11/14/inclusive-pesco-moves-forward-despite-remaining-concerns.

key capabilities allowing it to preserve a major influence on operations led with allies."[17]

Until 2017 France was mostly concerned with French *national* strategic autonomy, but in its *Revue Stratégique* it for the first time connected national strategic autonomy with that of Europe. During his New Year's speech on 19 January 2018, French President Emmanuel Macron said: "I want a France that is faithful to its commitments in the Atlantic Alliance, but which is also the engine of *European* strategic autonomy."[18] This call for the emergence of European strategic autonomy has to be seen in relation to the procurement policy that highlights the European preference principle in three out of the four French procurement policy categories, and also to the support displayed for the European Defence Fund. France connects the strengthening of the strategic autonomy of Europe with the development of a common strategic culture. Macron surprised his European allies in September 2017 by proposing a 'European Intervention Initiative' (now abbreviated as E2I). In June 2018 a Letter of Intent was signed by nine European states. The aim as formulated in the Letter of Intent was watered down considerably from the initial, albeit vague, purpose as formulated by Macron. It now reads: "to develop a shared strategic culture, which will enhance our ability, as European states, to carry out military missions and operations under the framework of the EU, NATO, the UN and/or ad hoc coalitions".[19]

17 Ronja Kempin and Barbara Kunz, "France, Germany and the Quest for European Strategic Autonomy: Franco-German Defence Cooperation in A New Era", *Notes du Cerfa* 141, December 2017, p. 12.

18 Ministère des Armées, "Draft Military Planning Law 2019-2025", p. 1.

19 Letter of intent concerning the development of a European intervention initiative (ei2), https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/convenanten/2018/07/10/letter-of-intent-concerning-the-development-of-the-european-intervention-initiative-ei2.

Europe going it alone

Over the years the notion of strategic autonomy has received the characteristics of a mantra: many documents repeat its necessity, nobody really specifies what it means and it has thereby gained an almost symbolic status. Leaving all kinds of ambiguity is of course not a new phenomenon for processes related to European integration. It serves a purpose to leave a concept somewhat vague, as it relieves the Member States of the obligation to address the differences of opinion on the matter. However, to follow through on achieving strategic autonomy in all aspects, operational, industrial, political and even nuclear, would have far-reaching consequences that are rarely considered.

Full strategic autonomy in a scenario where Europe was forced 'to go it alone' with the United States suddenly withdrawing from NATO seems unlikely. But a scenario in which NATO gradually erodes from the inside, with the United States and Europe drifting apart, is no longer unthinkable. What would this mean for European security? Even though EU countries now spend approximately €207 billion per year on defence (a number which will rapidly increase in the coming years), the assessment of the level of security that one can buy for that is rather bleak.[20] In a worst case scenario, in which Europe is left to its own devices, some analysts believe that it would take European countries up to ten to 15 years before they would be able to reach the level of conventional military capabilities that they would need to compensate for American contributions.[21] Others argue that the Europeans will at the most be able to "increase their capacity to undertake interventions in their own neighborhood

20 Lucie Béraud-Sudreau, *The US and its NATO allies, cost and value*, IISS, 9 July 2018, https://www.iiss.org/blogs/military-balance/2018/07/us-and-nato-allies-costs-and-value.

21 Claudia Major and Christian Mölling, 'Und wenn Trump den Nato-Ausstieg wahr macht?', *Tagesspiegel*, 21-7-2018.

without U.S. help".[22] According to the 2018 Capability Development Plan of the EU, in order to be able to live up to its current level of ambition, the EU member states lack a long list of enablers and other capabilities, such as satellites, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities (ISR), cyber response, logistics and medical capabilities, air superiority capabilities (air-to-air refuelling, Ballistic Missile Defence, A2/AD, air-based ISR), strategic and tactical air transport (including Medevac) and ground combat capabilities (precision strike, (un)manned vehicles).[23] To rectify these shortfalls all EU member states would have to invest heavily within a short time span and they will also have to spend collectively.

These – admittedly – very unprecise estimations leave aside the fact that many European armed forces are struggling with their readiness due to a backlog in repairs, updates, the availability of spare parts, training and recruitment.[24] Another problem is that the (potential) injection of money into many European armed forces does not translate into new capabilities in the short term. The absorption capacity of defence ministries and operational commands is lacking in this, while also the long timespan that it takes before capabilities can be put to use and to make sure armed forces are technologically up to date has to be taken into account. The research and development that goes into that can take more than a decade, especially if European countries and their defence industries have to go it alone in that area as well. Particularly daunting will be the requirement that European countries will have to become much better in coordinating their spending. As is well known, the sum of the defence output of 26[25] EU countries separately is a lot lower than if they pool their resources and spend wisely. A logic that has so far been counteracted by concerns about sovereignty and short-term economic national gains.

Nuclear autonomy

Although central to the French concept of strategic autonomy, the nuclear part of European strategic autonomy remains under-discussed. To consider nuclear options for Europe if the nuclear guarantees offered by the United States come into doubt, is something of a taboo. Discussing it might set off the exact circumstances that nobody in European NATO wants: a debate in the US about the rationality of risking Chicago for a European city, chipping away at the credibility of Western nuclear deterrence. Nevertheless, the option of a 'Eurodeterrent' had a tendency to pop up in European debates throughout the Cold War, the 1990s, and it resurfaced in Europe at the end of 2016 when the then candidate for the presidency, Donald Trump, raised doubts about his commitment to the nuclear guarantees of the United States for its European allies. The predominantly German debate was picked up in the media in the United States in 2017.[26] Although it remained a fringe debate in Europe, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the former Polish Prime Minister and the current chair of the Law and Justice Party, argued in a Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung interview that Europe may need to become a nuclear power of its own.[27] The latest additions to this debate were published last July in the Welt am Sonntag in which a well-known German scholar posits the need for Germany to become a nuclear power in

22 Hans Kudnani, *The necessity and impossibility of European strategic autonomy*, GMF, January 2018, http://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/The%20Necessity%20and%20Impossibility%20of%20Strategic%20Autonomy.pdf.

23 European Defence Agency, *Factsheet Capability Development Plan*, 28 June 2018, https://www.eda.europa.eu/what-we-do/our-current-priorities/capability-development-plan.

24 Kai Biermann and Julian Stahnke, 'Kaputte Truppe', *Die Zeit*, 20 April 2017, https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2017-04/bundeswehr-bestand-ausruestung-panzer.

25 Without the United Kingdom and without Denmark (opting out of the CSDP).

26 'Fearing U.S. Withdrawal, Europe Considers its Own Nuclear Deterrent', *New York Times*, March 2017.

27 'Im Gespräch: Jaroslaw Kaczynski, Vorsitzender der polnischen Regierungspartei PiS, über Schulz und Merkel, die EU und den Rechtsstaat; "Eine Atom-Supermacht Europa würde ich begrüßen"', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 7 February 2017.

light of the doubts about the US security guarantees.[28] The reactions to his piece were dismissive of Germany becoming a nuclear power, but generally welcomed a more open debate about the viability of the American nuclear umbrella.

Being able to rely on a solid transatlantic security relationship and the US nuclear commitment is by far the preferred option for Europe. It would however be naïve to believe that the transatlantic relationship will never change and that nuclear weapons will be banned anytime soon.[29] In addition, if our understanding of a European strategic autonomy means Europe's ability to guarantee its own security, this also entails the need for an independent European nuclear umbrella. It could be argued that irrespective of who resides in the White House, a strategically mature Europe should start thinking of a credible 'Eurodeterrent' that does not solely rely on the assumption that the US will come to its defence. However politically sensitive it may be, it seems that the extension of the French nuclear umbrella to also include Europe is the option that is mostly discussed. An advantage of such a 'French' solution is that it is not beforehand ruled out by the French and also not in violation of the non-proliferation treaty.[30]

The French Strategic Review focuses on preserving France's strategic autonomy, which is centred on maintaining and updating a credible maritime and air-based nuclear deterrent. Although France does not extend its nuclear deterrence beyond the requirements of the French state, the former President Francois Hollande stated that "France does not formulate its defence strategy in isolation. The existence of a French nuclear deterrent is a strong, crucial contribution to Europe." France has also demonstrated that it takes the EU Treaty's Article 42.7 seriously and that Article pledges assistance to any EU member state undergoing an armed aggression on its territory. It invoked the article after the November 2015 terrorist attacks on Paris. There is no nuclear dimension stipulated in this mutual assistance clause. This is, however, also not the case with NATO's Article 5. It is clear that the language of Article 42.7 is more forceful as it speaks of an "obligation of aid and assistance by all means in their power", while NATO's Article 5 refers to taking "action as it deems necessary".[31] Is the French option also a military sound one? The nuclear arsenals of France (290 deployed warheads) and the United Kingdom (120 deployed warheads) are much smaller than those of the United States[32], but in deterrence it is credibility combined with the capability of a second strike that makes the difference. By geographic proximity alone, the retaliation calculations of France and the United Kingdom could be different to those of the United States, a fact that is part of Russia's calculations as well.

28 Christian Hacke, 'Ein Nuklearmacht Deutschland stärkt die Sicherheit des Westens', *Welt am Sonntag*, 29 July 2018.

29 Alexandra Marksteiner, *Alternative Futures: Rethinking the European Nuclear Posture*, Atlantic Council, 18 July 2017, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/alternative-futures-rethinking-the-european-nuclear-posture.

30 Wissenschaftliche Dienste Deutscher Bundestag, *Völkerrechtliche Verpflichtungen Deutschlands beim Umgang mit Kernwaffen Deutsche und europäische Ko-Finanzierung ausländischer Nuklearwaffenpotentiale*, 2017, https://www.bundestag.de/blob/513080/c9a903735d5ea334181c2f946d2cf8a2/wd-2-013-17-pdf-data.pdf.

31 Art. 42.7 EU Treaty: "(…)if a member state is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other member states shall have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power, in accordance with article 51 of the United Nations charter". Article 5 of the NATO Treaty reads: "(…) will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area."

32 The US has 1600 deployed warheads, with the Russian Federation having 1750, see: Hans M. Kristensen and Robert N. Norris, *Status of World Nuclear Forces*, Federation of American Scientists, June 2018, https://fas.org/issues/nuclear-weapons/status-world-nuclear-forces/.

Conclusion: the strategic autonomy dilemma

Only France seems to know exactly what is meant by strategic autonomy. Whether France is also transparent about what *European* strategic autonomy means is less evident. Some constructive ambiguity about the term can be helpful in the EU context in working towards a more capable European defence. Autonomy in security and defence policies for the European Union can almost be equated with a political end-state of the integration process, a subject whose precise definition is also carefully avoided in order to keep all (or most) on board. At the same time, that ambiguity is not very well received across the Atlantic and has to be better clarified, even to those constituencies in the United States that feel that a stronger CSDP also benefits NATO.

Europe being fully autonomous in its security and defence is perhaps also not very *strategic*. Having such a powerful ally as the United States in your corner is strategically almost always the best choice. However, it is exactly this lack of choice that drives the current quest for strategic autonomy. What Hans Kudnani calls "the necessity and impossibility of European strategic autonomy" highlights the dilemma that the Europeans are faced with.[33] The EU and European NATO countries cannot afford to be in limbo about the commitment of the United States to their security. What they also cannot afford, at least not in the next 10-15 years, is to fully take care of their security on their own. Keeping the US as engaged as possible in European security, while at the same time strengthening the European capacity to defend itself, is the task at hand.

33 Hans Kudnani, *The necessity and impossibility of European strategic autonomy*, GMF, January 2018, http://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/The%20Necessity%20and%20Impossibility%20of%20Strategic%20Autonomy.pdf.

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