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Phoenix or Icarus?

European strategic autonomy in light of Ukraine

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With all eyes on the next Russian move in Ukraine, the notion of European strategic autonomy is experiencing a revival. At first glance, this seems overdue given that talks between Washington and Moscow bypass Brussels entirely. But beyond a limited use for the concept to help mitigate vulnerabilities resulting from dependencies and credibly malign actors that can exploit them, the notion remains surplus to requirements. Broad use of the term 'EU strategic autonomy', as is in vogue, risks giving populism and nationalism an unnecessary impulse. It also risks unmooring the EU from its collaborative and compromise-oriented essence because it depicts the world outside the EU as a swamp where danger lurks behind every tree. If EU Member States want a more assertive and capable set of institutions that act on their behalf, they should just get on with their unfinished business – the Single European Market, industrial/digital policy, fiscal transfers and defence/security policy.

Stefan Zweig's 'Die Welt von Gestern: Erinnerungen eines Europäers' narrates the first half of the 20th century as an oscillation between freedom and control, cosmopolitanism and nationalism, humanitarianism and xenophobia. It offers a fitting backdrop to current discussions on 'European strategic autonomy', as the concept risks another swing towards control, nationalism and xenophobia due to its overtones of peril, threat and exclusion. This time, pulling up the drawbridge is not justified with reference to the violent demise of the Habsburg empire or the rise of national socialism, but because of growing tensions between Russia (these days especially regarding Ukraine), China, the US and EU.

The EU feels – is? – threatened by:
a revisionist Russian state that compensates for poor governance with a promise of restoring imperial grandeur through military assertiveness; a resurgent China that consolidates its role as regional power in East Asia; and fraying relations with its longtime American protector that are increasingly devoid of common objectives. Contrary to popular belief, it is not more EU capability that will restore American interest in EU-US multilateralism.[1] Along the EU's southern shores, a more diffuse spectrum of threats lingers, including extremists, militants, smugglers, poverty, and repressive authoritarian leaders.

In this context, and accelerated by Covid-19, the term 'EU strategic autonomy' was launched as a rallying cry to safeguard quality of life and governance in the EU ('autonomy from') or, alternatively, to improve the EU's ability to compete globally ('autonomy to').[2] While not incompatible, the relationship between these conceptions is hardly spelled out. For example, how does their causality, if there is any, run? Which objective represents the core focus, and what are the costs for the other? It is the old dilemma of swords versus ploughshares reincarnated, but without prioritisation.[3]

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[1] See for example: Besch, S. and L. Scazzieri, *European strategic autonomy and a new transatlantic bargain*, Brussels: CFER, 2020.

Both conceptions of EU strategic autonomy could, for example, also be pursued under existing policy headers such as completion of the European Single Market socioeconomically viewed (quality of life), and maturation of the EU's foreign, security and defence policy (global competition). In other words, as a signpost for political decision making, the term 'strategic autonomy' is either unnecessary or unclear.

Finally, neither conception answers the question 'autonomy from whom and to do what precisely'?[4] This is nevertheless an essential question since autonomy is a relative notion. Neither is establishing autonomy cost free, as the UK has just discovered. By leaving the answer vague, a diffuse image of strategic risk and threat is created and prioritised against which the EU must presumably arm itself with 'strategic autonomy'.

Teasing out terms of debate

The original meaning[5] of 'EU strategic autonomy' was a desire on the part of some EU Member States to be able to operate militarily out-of-area without US consent or involvement.[6] This meaning has largely been overtaken, however, by a much wider discourse in Brussels that remains rather vague and difficult to understand.[7] Hence, it is still worth asking today what 'EU strategic autonomy' actually means and what value it adds to the existing EU glossary. Even though it is hard to define terms used in political agenda setting – since they usually serve different ends for different actors, with ambiguity being a useful quality – one can nevertheless tease out their implications at the intellectual level.

To begin with, the object of '**European** strategic autonomy', the 'EU', can be described as a club of democratic and market-oriented states engaged in a permanent process of pooling parts of their claims to sovereignty in order to address collective action problems more effectively. These states perform in a tightly-regulated, highly-institutionalised and self-perpetuating governance structure that operates on the basis of formal laws and rules, as well as informal pressure and negotiation.

In consequence, EU strategic autonomy can only be pursued in areas where Member States have already pooled part of their sovereignty – and only within the conditions under which they have done so – or in areas where Member States are willing to pool part of their sovereignty in the near future. Where disagreement reigns, space for establishing 'strategic autonomy' will necessarily be limited. As a result, speaking about EU strategic autonomy inevitably means speaking about pooling more sovereignty. In the area of geopolitical competition, this means upgrades of foreign, security, fiscal, migration and energy policies. Yet, today the *Kompetenz – Kompetenz* question is barely on the table in the EU's daily business, excepting the consultations taking place in the context of the conference on the future of Europe. Discussion of competences has largely been replaced by discussions about capabilities.

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[2] Contrast the European Commission's 2021 strategic foresight report (accessible here) with HR/VP Borrell's blogpost of 3 December 2021 (accessible here).

[3] We thank Konstantin Bärwaldt (FES) and Luuk Molthof (Clingendael) for their constructive review of this brief.

[4] Franke, U. and T. Varma, *Independence play: Europe's pursuit of strategic autonomy*, ECFR, 2019.

[5] See: https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/89865/why-european-strategic-autonomy-matters_en (accessed 9 February 2022).

[6] Zandee, D. et al., *European strategic autonomy in security and defence: Now the going gets tough, it's time to get going*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2020.

[7] Youngs, R., *The EU's Strategic Autonomy Trap*, Carnegie Europe, 8 March 2021, online.

Next, most textbooks refer to '**strategic**' or 'strategy' as a process for realising measurable long-term objectives that are shared between those accountable for their delivery (in the case of 'European **strategic** autonomy', EU elites), ambitious in relation to the current state of things, and resourced in a manner commensurate with the gap between present and objective.

Such objectives are difficult to establish in the EU because the strategic interests of its members are diverse (consider the security/military sphere as an example[8]). EU Member States and institutions usually reconcile divergent interests via a lowest common denominator approach, by logrolling or bureaucratic innovation. The effect is that commitment and progress vary considerably across objectives. A push for more 'strategic autonomy' is therefore likely to result in 'variable autonomy'. But is variable autonomy still coherent and relevant as a concept?

Finally, with regard to the objective of 'European strategic **autonomy**', the term 'autonomy' can be understood in this context as the ability of a body politic to function and make decisions without external control or external coercive influence (assuming that less forceful degrees of external influence are inevitable in a globalised world and can be highly desirable). In a sense, the term 'autonomy' is the supranational equivalent of the notion of 'sovereignty' that has become the preserve of states.[9] Both terms have an aspirational quality – in reality, no country is fully sovereign or ever has been. In other words, autonomy is always relative in terms of content and other body politics.

Putting these elements together suggests that 'EU strategic autonomy' refers to a tighter pooling of sovereignty between EU members to pursue a set of strategic objectives that, once realised, reduces negative external influences on EU deliberation and decision making in their current form.

A problematic concept emerges

It is of interest to note that this is a negative framework for action. Essentially, it views maintaining the status quo as improvement. It does not take as a starting point the broader canvas of what the EU wants to achieve, only later identifying negative influences that require mitigation. Instead, it puts negative external influences centre stage and assumes that these can be unequivocally labelled (as otherwise it will not be clear in relation to whom or what autonomy must be established). This risks creating a self-fulfilling simplification of reality, for example by eliminating the possibility that partnership and competition can occur at the same time.

It is also intriguing that all three elements of 'EU strategic autonomy' as outlined above feature a significant process component: the EU as a process of pooling sovereignty, strategy as a process of achieving objectives with certain attributes, and autonomy as a process to reduce negative external influences. This suggests 'EU strategic autonomy' will not be an end state, but a trajectory.

Making negative external influences the focus of a continuous process of political deliberation is likely to generate a state of mind in which risks, threats and vulnerabilities feature prominently – and which autonomy offers protection from. Risk- and threat mitigation prioritises hard boundaries of inclusion/exclusion, zero-sum methods and isolation over flexible belonging, positive-sum methods and realising opportunities. This represents a marked shift away from the pluralistic, compromise oriented and collaborative nature of the EU as a problem-solving method.

Let's get specific about autonomy

Since there are nevertheless specific risks/threats to the EU that require mitigation, a solution to this problem lies in settling for a narrower understanding of 'EU strategic autonomy' as a concept to manage a specific set of dependencies, namely those that can be exploited by external actors to exercise a degree of coercive influence on the realisation of strategic EU objectives. In a generous reading, the somewhat convoluted term 'open strategic autonomy' can be understood to reflect this logic.[10]

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[8] Zandee et al. (2021), *op.cit.*

[9] Van Veen, E., *The valuable tool of sovereignty: Its use in situations of competition and inter-dependence*, Bruges: College of Europe, 2007.

This has the advantage of generating two criteria for policy makers to identify autonomy 'shortfalls': a) the existence of dependencies that can have significant negative effects on critical EU public goods, services or values – now or in the near future; b) the presence of external actors who can be credibly suspected of potential exploitation of such dependencies for their own benefit. Application of these two criteria – condition and actor – points to autonomy shortfalls such as:

- the EU energy market's heavy reliance on the import of Russian gas that could leave millions of households without heating overnight
- the large role that the US market – and in some countries/sectors, the Chinese market – plays in the financial health and growth of European businesses, which exposes EU economic dynamism and employment to US deficits and dysfunctional governance, or, in the case of China, assertive authoritarian diplomacy
- the absence of a common migration policy that risks exposing EU Member States situated next to unscrupulous authoritarian neighbours to large inflows of refugees
- the dependence of EU-based financial institutions, such as SWIFT or commercial banks, on US financial markets, flows and dollar-denominated assets, which makes them vulnerable to US economic coercion.

Where a condition of dependence exists without the additional presence of a potentially malign actor, such as a limited ability to produce a vaccination against Covid-19 or the absence of an EU computing chip industry, the EU does not in fact face a vulnerability against which autonomy offers protection. A drive for autonomy is more likely to invite protectionism (with its own costs).[11] The example of Covid-19 vaccine development is testimony to the virtue of global research, and government and commercial collaboration under severe pressure. The picture only shifts if there are credible indications of deliberate and malign supply-side constraints.

It is for the same reason that strategic autonomy is not required or desirable in areas such as social media tech enterprises, climate change, robotics or artificial intelligence – even though these topics are regularly mentioned in the discourse on EU strategic autonomy.[12] For example, if the EU attaches strategic importance to a healthy digital environment for citizens and business, it can regulate this domain in reflection of its preferences, or develop better digital, entrepreneurial and start-up policies instead of aiming for greater autonomy. In any case, the threat to tolerance, civility and 'otherness' posed by non-EU internet and social media enterprises – such as FaceBook – will not be resolved by becoming autonomous. Any business – European or American – will take profit maximisation to its logical conclusion within the confines of the law, and this is precisely the problem that needs addressing.

It could even be argued that improving the EU's ability to intervene militarily in its neighbourhood does not have much to do with strategic autonomy in the sense of dependence/malign actor-based vulnerability. After all, the only credible risk of direct military aggression comes from Russia in relation to Poland and the Baltic Member States of the EU.

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[10] Molthof, L., *Unpacking open strategic autonomy: From concept to practice*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2021; Dutch Permanent Representation to the EU, *Non-paper on strategic autonomy while preserving an open economy*, March 2021, online (accessed 9 February 2022); for a useful explanatory video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2mY1fWT9-4I (accessed 9 February 2022).

[11] Tocci, N., *European Strategic Autonomy: What It Is, Why We Need It, How to Achieve It*, Rome: IAI, 2021.

[12] European Commission, *Strategic foresight report 2021: The EU's capacity and freedom to act*, Brussels: EC, 2021.

Here, NATO already assures European autonomy[13] (the European Council retied the Gordian knot of EU vs. NATO in October 2021 through its 'and-and' formula).[14]
For the remainder, the EU can simply invest in better strategy and more capabilities, as it is doing with the EU Compass and the European Peace Facility.

Future use of 'strategic autonomy'

It is prudent for the EU to put better protections in place against critical vulnerabilities that can be exploited by malign others, for example through onshoring, creating redundancies or agreeing new common policies and capabilities.

It is also smart to pursue environmental, industrial, digital and social policies that are fit for the 21st century and that resonate with the added value that EU Member States and EU institutions wish to generate.

Since the EU is surrounded by authoritarian states, it is even useful to learn to speak 'the language of power', but only as long as it is understood that the playbook for action that gives true expression to such language differs between democracies and autocracies.

Grouping all such issues under an agenda of 'EU strategic autonomy' confuses the discussion and is likely to frustrate progress. Worse, it also excludes the possibility of strategic partnerships and promotes a mindset that the world is awash with risks and threats from which the EU needs to protect itself – such as autocrats, terrorists and, in the eyes of some, immigrants. In normal times this smacks of securitisation, but in times of populism it is likely to stimulate protectionism, facilitate 'us versus them' narratives, and reduce constructive global engagement.

As an alternative, the EU would do well to limit its strategic autonomy agenda to mitigating existing vulnerabilities that result from the combination of dependency with (a) malign actor(s) willing to exploit it, as well as creating a mechanism to scan for emergent vulnerabilities that builds on existing foresight capabilities.

Beyond this, a focus on enhancing the EU's 'strategic attraction' projects a more emulative and inspirational image in a competitive world by showing that 'the language of power' is in fact a backwards solution for dealing with tensions compared with the alternative of engaged multilateralism, reliable regulation, principle-based negotiation and high quality governance.

Despite its shortcomings, the EU is a recurrent and unique experiment in citizen-focused supranational cooperation. Its progress must be secured, but in a manner that maintains openness and interaction.

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[13] See: https://www.ft.com/content/f14c3e59-30bb-4686-8ba3-18ff860647e7 (accessed 9 February 2022).

[14] See: https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-leaders-strategic-compass-different-directions/ (accessed 9 February 2022).

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