

European Strategic Autonomy: Opportunities and Challenges

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For decades, the role of the European Union in the international arena has been characterized by its soft, civilian, and normative power¹ as its international influence was based on its economic strength and civilian peacekeeping capabilities, distinguishing it from other international actors. At the same time, the EU's hard power tools have received much less attention so far: defense cooperation on an EU level has so far remained limited due to differences in national interests, in member states' threat perceptions and because of the Union's strong international economic and regulatory influence. The different historical experiences and the geographical locations of member states also lead to different interests and strategic cultures, which are further obstacles to strengthening the Union's strategic autonomy in the traditional sense.

With an increasingly assertive China, an adventurous Turkey, and with a Russia that contests today's borders in its neighborhood, the Union is facing increasing confrontations, which have become even more frequent during the Trump era. Between 2017 and 2021, the Union often had to step up against these actors alone, but in the absence of the US and Britain, the EU's global influence and diplomatic power often seemed negligible vis-à-vis these actors. These events have contributed to the emergence of strategic autonomy as an influential concept in European discourses. Despite that the debate on European sovereignty has become an integral part of the EU discourse in recent years, there is still no consensus on exactly what strategic autonomy means and in which areas the Union should become more independent.

The Future of European security and defense policy

As the strategic focus of the UK and the US have increasingly shifted to the Asia Pacific, more and more EU Member States feel the need to strengthen their own defense capabilities and operational autonomy, but there are differing views on what capabilities should be strengthened at the EU level and what should remain a national monopoly over hard power. Most member states are still guided by the 2009 Lisbon Treaty that envisaged the EU's role in the field of security by strengthening capabilities including air-to-air refueling, peacekeeping missions, providing civilian and medical support to partner countries, or enhancing military mobility, evacuation capabilities, and interoperability.

Without doubt, the chances of establishing an operationally independent European Union army or a European command center completely independent of NATO are rather limited and support for it remains insignificant. Yet, European strategic autonomy can also be strengthened through military cooperation and the harmonization of defense capabilities with member states' differing threat perceptions being not the obstacles but the engines of such cooperation.

Military cooperation at the EU level can have several benefits: a more active European involvement in the production of military equipment could contribute to the development of the EU military industry, reduce the costs of military assets and equipment, and strengthen

¹ Ian Manners, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 2002:
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1468-5965.00353>

industrial and technological innovation in the EU. According to a 2013 study commissioned by the European Commission, duplication in European defense capabilities resulted a €26 billion loss that year², and its annual costs have remained the same³ since then. The harmonization of EU defense capabilities at the EU level should therefore be a priority, as eliminating duplication of military capabilities would free up significant resources for member states.

The fourth industrial revolution produced sophisticated, dual-capable technological developments such as artificial intelligence, autonomous robots and various cyber technologies that will become more and more widespread in the future. Such developments are led by China, the United States, Israel, Russia, the United Kingdom and Canada, and they will strongly influence global power dynamics and structures⁴ in the future. Considering this, while the EU's normative power is strong, Europe cannot afford to be left out from the production of emerging technologies in the long term.

As the civilian and military use of these emerging technologies can transform markets and influence social, legal, ethical and security dynamics⁵, it would be crucial for the EU to be involved not only in the research and development of these technologies but also in their regulation. However, if the EU remains a negligible actor in this field, its normative power will also be weakened and, in the long run, its ability to influence the global regulatory environment for the use of dual-capable technologies will be even more limited.

The above indicate that there is indeed room for a stronger EU cooperation in the defense sector, but this does not mean that all EU aspirations under the banner of sovereignty and strategic autonomy are constructive. A good example of this is the European Peace Facility⁶, which has recently given green light for the EU to transport weapons to conflict-affected areas. While this may seem like a great opportunity to strengthen the EU's military industry, arms sales to unstable regions could significantly undermine the security of the Union and the wider region in the long run as there is no guarantee that the weapons sold or provided by the EU will not land in the hands of different militias and warlords or that they will not be used by authoritarian regimes to suppress popular protests⁷.

² Blanca Ballester, European Added Value Unit, 2013. december: http://81.47.175.201/sky-water/attachments/article/188/2013_Cost_of_Non_Europe_Security_Defence_Policy.pdf

³ Blanca Ballester, European Added Value Unit, 2013. december: http://81.47.175.201/sky-water/attachments/article/188/2013_Cost_of_Non_Europe_Security_Defence_Policy.pdf

⁴ Raluca Csernatoni, *Peace, Security and Defence Cooperation in Post-Brexit Europe*, 2019: <https://www.springerprofessional.de/en/the-eu-s-technological-power-harnessing-future-and-emerging-tech/16564040>

⁵ Raluca Csernatoni, *Peace, Security and Defence Cooperation in Post-Brexit Europe*, 2019: <https://www.springerprofessional.de/en/the-eu-s-technological-power-harnessing-future-and-emerging-tech/16564040>

⁶ European Peace Facility: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/03/22/eu-sets-up-the-european-peace-facility/>

⁷ Michael Peel, Financial Times, 2021. május: <https://www.ft.com/content/dd29eb4d-1fc0-4123-ada1-290c4c63d966>

Other avenues to strategic autonomy

An increasingly important element of European foreign policy are climate change and environmental protection. Despite Joe Biden's election, there are significant differences between US and European climate strategies: while the US relies on private sector innovation, green investment, and new technologies such as green hydrogen, the European Union wants to achieve change through its impact on the international regulatory environment, including through carbon pricing, the carbon border adjustment scheme and innovation in renewable energy sources⁸. As the previous instances indicate, the Union has the power to effectively shape international practices and regulations, especially by encouraging cooperation with large emitters such as China or the United States, which should be further strengthened by the EU.

Besides, the Union's role in improving global health will also be essential for achieving strategic autonomy. For example, the Union can and should play a major role in building global vaccine production capabilities in order to enable more equitable global vaccine distribution and to prevent the further spread of the virus in developing or emerging countries. The EU could also help build the capacity for global vaccine distribution by setting long-term international standards.

Conclusion

While the European Union has been able to remain a significant normative and, for the most part, soft power actor on the world stage with its economic power, the values it represents or is supposed to represent, and its standard setting regulatory environment, there is a need to improve the EU's responses to emerging global challenges.

The harmonization of defense capabilities and improving security cooperation at the EU level can have numerous benefits, but national interests often set back these efforts, hampering interoperability and increasing Member States' and EU security spending.

Nevertheless, strengthening European sovereignty cannot be limited to foreign, security and defense policy: we have seen countless examples of the Union's ability to achieve positive change in international practices, and it would be essential to extend this normative power to areas such as climate protection, renewable energy innovation, global health, or the regulation of digital markets in partnership with partners such as the UK, US or even Australia.

⁸ Mehreen Khan, Leslie Hook, Victor Mallet, Katrina Manson, Financial Times, 2021. április 23.: <https://www.ft.com/content/b95de724-75c8-4155-88ed-5808fb761942>