STRATEGIC AUTONOMY: FROM MISCONCEIVED TO USEFUL CONCEPT

What can we learn from the Northern outlook?

The concept of 'European strategic autonomy' is girdled by myths and resistance. These common misconceptions can be overcome by member states to strengthen the EU in the face of today's challenging security environment.

EU member states are realising the need for a collective – and independent – ability to take responsibility for their own security. This has come to be called 'strategic autonomy', whereby the EU is to strengthen its capability to define, decide and pursue its interests in the 21st century. While consensus is growing among all EU member states

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ways forward for the concept of strategic autonomy:

- Level of ambition: strategic autonomy should not be seen as an end in itself but as a means to protect and promote common values and interests across strategically important EU policy areas.

- Geography: strategic autonomy should enable the EU to undertake activities, in particular in the immediate European neighbourhood.

- Policy scope: strategic autonomy should encompass the entire spectrum of foreign and security policy, and not just defence

on the need to act more independently, there are still many misconceptions regarding what strategic autonomy actually is.

Guided by the positions of key northern member states – Denmark, Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands* – this policy brief clarifies the concept of European strategic autonomy. It discusses how these states view the concept, debunks the myths about strategic autonomy and proposes a way of making it a useful instrument in the EU foreign and security toolbox.

Strategic autonomy: conflict over content versus rhetoric

Originally a French idea, the proposal for European strategic autonomy met immediate resistance from those member states who are reluctant to further integrate security and defence policy in an EU framework. This is not least because the term has been subject to misconceptions. As one European official put it, 'we agree 100% with the content of the concept but the rhetoric around it is toxic'. A common fear is that strengthened European strategic autonomy can be interpreted as an alternative to NATO and the transatlantic relationship. At the other end of the spectrum is the notion that since the EU will never be autonomous from NATO and the US, it makes no sense to suggest that the EU should be able to act alone on the global stage.

Nevertheless, the concept of strategic autonomy is now written into key EU documents, not least the comprehensive 2016 EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy. The EU and its member states have also launched new initiatives to further strategic autonomy in political and practical terms, such as the European Commission's new industrial strategy, the European Defence Fund and Permanent Structured Cooperation. Most recently, member states have agreed to develop a strategic compass to guide strategic direction for EU security and defence, including common threat analysis and planning for the future.

Thus, although the concept of strategic autonomy provokes disagreement, EU member states are still keen to enhance the EU's ability to act on the international stage. A move to take the concept out of this stalemate can begin with addressing the misconceptions surrounding it. One path to this is provided by the northern countries of Denmark, Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands.

This group of countries is not a homogenous one: Denmark has a national opt-out from EU military cooperation; Sweden is a neutral and non-aligned state; Germany has significant caveats when it comes to the use of force; the Netherlands has a proactive set of armed forces engaged both in the EU and in NATO. While these countries thus come from different starting points, it seems upon closer inspection that their positions converge as a group on how European strategic autonomy could be defined. The table below sets out the basic 'what', 'where' and 'how' of strategic autonomy.

LEVEL OF AMBITION	THE NORTHERN APPROACH TO EUROPEAN STRATEGIC AUTONOMY
What: degree of independence	'Complementarity' *Strengthening EU security and defence capabilities is not a move to exclude the US from questions of European security but to enhance the European pillar within NATO.*
Where: geographical scope	'Proximity' *EU interventions and missions should focus on crisis management in the eastern and southern neighbourhoods, and the EU's ability to apply hard power should be strengthened – but not for territorial defence.*
How: policy areas	'Comprehensiveness' *Key policy areas include defence and security – but also diplomatic, civilian, economic and technological policy areas in recognition that European security relates to hybrid threats to trade, industry, infra-structure and the cyber domain, as well as to more conventional threats.*

What: autonomy 'to' – not 'from'

The myths and misconceptions about strategic autonomy often begin with discussions about its end-goal, the extent to which it implies genuine independence, and what that means for the transatlantic relationship. There is broad consensus that the EU should complement, not replace, the alliance. Yet redundancy is an ever-present concern and to some extent one reason why the development

Where: securing the European neighbourhood or out of area?

Another misconception regards where Europe should exert its strategic autonomy since fundamental differences exist between the geopolitical and the security outlooks of individual European countries. Increasingly, there is a focus on protecting Europe's own territory and citizens. This trend is visible in recent strategies and mandates for CSDP missions

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of strategic autonomy is struggling to move forward. The northern countries agree that while strategic autonomy has become an EU objective, it should not be seen as an end in itself but rather as a means to protect and promote European values and interests. They also stress that strategic autonomy is not autonomy from, for example, the US, but rather autonomy to act. In other words, it is not about pushing away partnerships and acting alone but enhancing Europe's ability to move independently when needed. The northern countries firmly perceive NATO and close cooperation with the US to be the cornerstone of European security. This is also why strategic autonomy should be viewed as a desire for Europe and the EU to shoulder a greater burden in security cooperation with the US, and it will therefore lead to a strengthened – not weakened – transatlantic relationship. For decades, the US has pressured Europe to take more responsibility for their own security, and the quest for strengthened strategic autonomy should thus be seen in that light. However, more European responsibility is not just about contributing economically to burden-sharing in NATO, but also hinges on the EU's ability to act on the global stage in a changing world order. With the US pivot towards Asia, and a more assertive China and Russia, this is in the interest of Europe.

which all share characteristics: EU external action should address challenges that have direct consequences for Europe's internal security. But which challenges in particular?

The northern states' approach to the geography of strategic autonomy is to enable the EU to provide security in the near neighbourhood surrounding member states rather than distant, out-of-area missions. While the immediate geographical area of the EU would include the east as well as the south, the EU's role will likely be greater in the south, including the Mediterranean, the Sahel and Maghreb area, because the EU's toolbox is particularly useful here. In the east, the challenges require a military response, and here NATO would be a primary actor. Thus, from the perspective of the northern countries, strategic autonomy should not include the establishment of military forces to be active on European territory. The military protection of Europe is a matter for individual member states and NATO, not the EU.

How: the scope of policy areas

Finally, a key point of misunderstanding is around which policy areas within the EU framework are relevant for achieving strategic autonomy – whether the concept should apply to European defence

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capabilities only (and how?), or whether it should be broadened to also encompass other dimensions within the spectrum of foreign and security policy, such as diplomatic, civilian, technological and economic dimensions.

From the perspective of the northern states, the scope of European strategic autonomy should encompass a broad application of policy tools to reflect today's complex threat pattern, where insecurity stems not only from military threats but is increasingly manifested in other areas of society, such as trade, technology and critical infrastructure. Herein lies the strength of the EU as a security provider compared to NATO, namely the EU's manifold foreign policy toolbox that can address security threats outside the 'traditional' spectrum of threats such as hybrid threats, as well as conflict and instability in a comprehensive and long-term manner.

An important question here is also the role of the industrial base and issues related to procurement in the European defence industry. While the northern states aspire to reduce dependencies on industries outside the EU, they emphasise that a precondition for European strategic autonomy is to remain open to trade and cooperation with third parties.

The concept of European strategic autonomy is entrenched in EU policy. It is here to stay – and now it offers a window of opportunity. On the one hand, the new Biden administration presents an occasion to reaffirm transatlantic security relations. Enhancing European strategic autonomy can support this effort by bringing enhanced EU defence capabilities to the table. On the other hand, the hybrid and unconventional nature of contemporary security threats – be they great power politics, trade wars, or technological competition – necessitates the activation of all relevant policy areas that can protect and promote European values and interests in the years to come. European strategic autonomy, freed from common misconceptions, actually holds this possibility.

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*   This policy brief draws on discussions held with the mentioned EU member states at the DIIS seminar 'European Defence Cooperation: geopolitical ambitions vs. reality?' held on 19 November 2020.

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