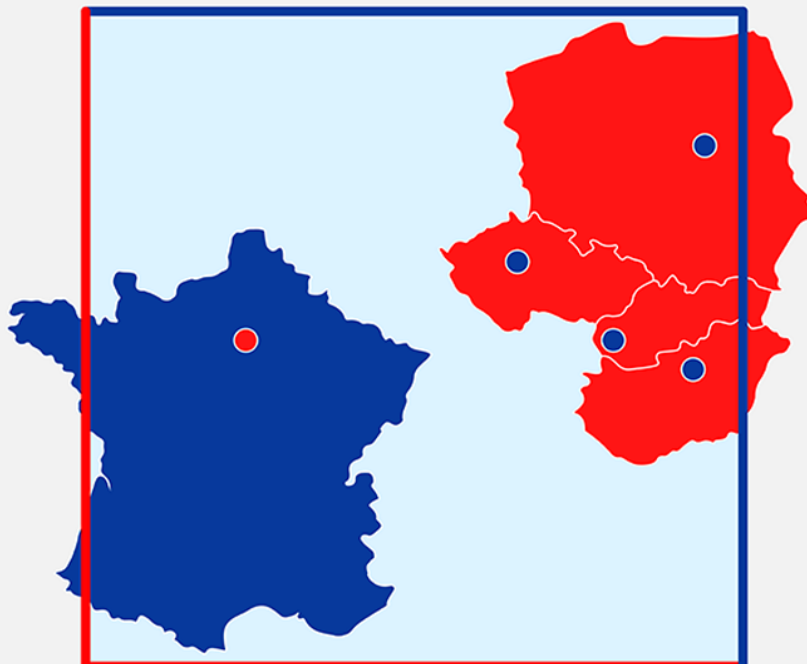


POLICY PAPER

On defense, France leads the way,
but can't leave the V4 behind

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- Defence and the field of CSDP are, on paper, the main agenda for V4-France cooperation, given the generally accepted necessity of the further integration of defense efforts, one of the rare truly consensual issues at the EU level in 2019. This will certainly represent one of the main priorities for the Commission that will start its work in late 2019, and we can expect that the advances of the last few years will be moved forward under the next Commission, and new proposals to be launched.
- While there is a European agreement on the necessity to deliver on the plans, there does however remain some serious misunderstandings about the much-vaunted notion of "strategic autonomy", which has attracted a lot of criticism in V4 countries. This paper will therefore focus on unpacking the idea of strategic autonomy, which has been the object of many - willful? - misunderstandings, with France being at the origin of them in some cases, and which also showcases that France and the V4 countries maintain different perspectives regarding transatlantic relations and European ambitions.



Of all the debates that have taken place in the framework of increased cooperation in Common Security and Defense Policy, the notion of strategic autonomy has probably attracted the most heated discussions in the policy circles in Brussels and European capitals. Since formally calling for “an appropriate level of ambition and strategic autonomy” in the EU Global Strategy in June 2016, the onus has been put on finding the right balance in defining this notion, and a certain “battle of definitions” has taken place between interested actors (on top of a very rich body of work from think tanks across the continent). This contention around defining strategic autonomy, and by extension, around European sovereignty, interestingly reveals the fault lines that exist between different EU member states on their approaches, concerns and interests in having the EU play a bigger role in the security and defense realms, and serve as an interesting point of understanding the dynamics of the transatlantic relationship. Very clear differences remain between member states in defining what “an appropriate level” means; however, this is a situation where finding a compromise acceptable to all member states may actually go against the desired aims of strategic autonomy.

Strategic autonomy, in the current debates, very much underpins the other developments that have taken place in European defense cooperation in the last three years. Instruments such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), mechanisms such as the Coordinated Annual Review on Defense (CARD), the European Defense Fund (EDF), to cite only the biggest, are the building blocks of European strategic autonomy (and of European sovereignty). Stating this allows to have a practical rather than philosophical debate about autonomy, and to take the heat out of the debate, such as has often been seen in certain central and eastern European countries, where this term is often - purposefully? - understood as questioning the fundamentals of the transatlantic Alliance and of cooperation in the framework of NATO.

Another misunderstanding about strategic autonomy also comes from the French roots of the term. Indeed, the idea of *autonomie stratégique* is considered an aim of French defense policy, but it would be reductive to think that the fact that French elites are championing this concept means that the EU wants to turn the transatlantic link on its head, or that the goal is to build up a continental military power with uniquely French attributes, such as a European nuclear deterrent. As stated by Corentin Brustlein, “a reality-check of France’s defense policy reminds us that strategic autonomy is less about conducting a foreign and security policy in total political and military isolation from the United States than it is about being able to decide upon, and to control at least in part, one’s own fate.”¹ There is therefore a need, in conversations about the issue, to showcase the deep and continually existing linkages between strategic autonomy and membership in NATO.

Understanding this brings us to hash out the term in a way that seems agreeable by most: strategic autonomy should be seen as having the ability, for the EU’s member states, within the framework of the Union, to have a clear vision of its global role, and to translate this vision into political goals and plans that help achieve these goals, for example, but not exclusively, through the use of military force. It does not mean conducting its security and defense policy in isolation from the United States or other international actors. This is for the broad understanding of the term; a more narrow understanding would limit strategic autonomy to the military realm, and would mean that it is nothing more (and nothing less) than the capacity of a state (or a group of states, in the case of the EU) to decide on and conduct operations independently.

The concept of strategic autonomy can also be apprehended in two other, complementary, ways. First, it can be defined through its objectives, or the so-called three ‘freedoms’, which were first defined in the 2008 French White Book: the freedom to *assess*, the freedom to *decide* and the freedom to *act*. Second, strategic autonomy can

¹ <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/editoriaux-de-lifri/european-strategic-autonomy-balancing-ambition-and-responsibility>

also regularly defined through specific components, meaning the capacities required to achieve strategic objectives. Three components are considered, as per the 2008 White Book : *political* autonomy, meaning the capacity to take and implement political decisions, *operational* autonomy, meaning the capacity to plan and conduct operations, and finally, *industrial* autonomy which is the capacity to develop and produce arms and equipment free of any restrictions imposed by a third state or external supplier.

These rather clearly constrained definitions of strategic autonomy showcase the fact that the reality behind the notion does not mean that the EU *shall* be autonomous from other nations, partners, or organizations, but rather that it would have the ability, as a foreign policy actor, to conduct a certain level of operations and achieve certain aims independently from the resources, whether they be political or military, of other actors. This last option is not necessarily a preferred option, especially in contingencies such as fighting ISIS in the Middle East, and should not be considered as such, but should not be entirely ruled out either.

It is therefore important for the V4 countries to express clearly, based on these principles, where their red lines actually lie, in terms of language and signalling to partners in NATO, instead of remaining in an uncomfortable in-between with the proposals from France and other countries who are pushing for further defense integration, and those who want to take more time to strategically adapt to a new environment.

One of the important lines of division in this debate is the changing role of transatlantic relations, as it has a clear impact on countries' willingness to accept the changing lines of strategic autonomy. This is a complex field in which Central and Eastern Europe must yet find its footing, and on which there is only a minimal level of V4 unity. Thinking about thus also implies political and military leaders asking themselves the question of whether their interests - security, economic, and political - are better defended by (and in) the EU or by a close(r) association with the US. This binary question may seem unnecessarily reductive but its terms are no longer as provocative as they would have been a few

years ago; this is especially true for smaller countries in Central Europe, such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia or even Hungary who, for various reasons, have an interest in increased regional security and continued European integration. It is no surprise that the first two have been strong proponents of recent European efforts in the field of defense, which signal that these countries have become what could be called "rational Atlanticists" instead of "reflexive Atlanticists", meaning their leaders will undertake a thinking process of the framework in which their interests will be better upheld. This comes in contrast with the Polish position, which continues to support as close as possible a relationship with the US in order to support the continued reinforcement of the Eastern flank of the Alliance, as shown by the discussions around a potential permanent U.S. presence.

Furthermore, in the framework of this debate, it is absolutely necessary for European leaders to articulate their ambitions and objectives to U.S. leaders if they want to go beyond the reluctance that has been observed in certain U.S. circles towards initiatives that raise the specter of the 3 Ds; with the EU to avoid de-linking its efforts from Alliance decision-making, duplication of existing efforts, and discrimination against non-EU members. The return of this lazy trope in American circles is highly symbolic of the lack of interest in European initiatives, and should act as a call to action from the side of European leaders to actively engage their American counterparts on what a stronger CSDP means for their commitments to NATO and the Alliance as a whole, and also to set a narrative that would shape European interests in the security and economic realms. It is clear that European initiatives in no way go against any of Madeleine Albright's prescriptions, especially with the efforts made to integrate third countries on a case-by-case basis in European Defense Fund projects.

A RAND study in 2002 imagined adding a fourth D to the list, decoupling, described as the "concern in the United States that the European allies taking part in ESDI could create circumstances in which they would see their security as somehow decoupled from the Atlantic framework." It is, interestingly, exactly this concern that is echoed on the European side, as mentioned above with the

French and German declarations; in reverse, the same train of thought can also be seen in the Polish proposal to foot the bill for hosting a (permanently stationed) U.S. Army armored division. As a matter of fact, it is in the gap between the thinking in Paris and Berlin on one side and Warsaw on the other that lies the nature of European strategic autonomy.

In following, with the accepted premise that European leaders need to have clear goals to achieve strategic autonomy, the next question would be “autonomy for what” (and not “from whom”). In other words, what benefits the EU and its member states can derive from reaching strategic autonomy in the industrial, operational, but also political fields.

Answering the “for what?” questions implies to define the core tasks at the heart of strategic autonomy, with the two easily accepted tasks being the stabilization of the immediate European neighborhood, as defined by the Petersberg tasks, and the defense of Europe from terrorism and the knock-on effects of political and social instability in the Middle East as well as a North and Sub Saharan Africa. Beyond that, the next question on the line, which should already be considered from now on, concerns the role that the EU will play in international security and the protection of the global commons? This question is especially relevant given the uncertainties surrounding transatlantic relations and the knock-on effects of escalation between the U.S. and China regarding trade, but also regarding energy supplies. Finally, the last step, which is the most controversial as far as V4 perspectives are concerned, is the role that the EU should play in collective security and territorial defense. While not a realistic discussion at the moment, especially given that it would require the open extension of French nuclear guarantees to the rest of the continent, it however shall already form part of discussions both at the V4 and the EU level. As written by Jolyon Howorth, “strategic autonomy must mean that, eventually, as was originally intended at the birth of the Alliance, the EU will become capable of providing for its own collective defense. Any other interpretation of strategic autonomy simply perpetuates dependency.” This makes even more important the necessity for the EU to clearly outline what it wants for

the future in order to avoid any difficulties, such as the ones that we saw in late 2018 and early 2019, with the US, and in order also not to put the V4 countries in front of a binary choice.

In parallel with these discussions, a major challenge is looming for CEE countries, and it is found in the necessary adaptation of their militaries to the missions that will be required of them in the future, and the frameworks in which missions will be carried out. Trends indicate that mobile, highly specialized missions will constitute the bulk of future deployments, meaning that armed forces will have to find their niche, or their added value, in these processes. Estonia has shown political willingness to do so by engaging in the French-led European Intervention Initiative (by pledging the participation of special forces in contingency planning) and in operation Barkhane in the Sahel-Sahara strip, which has given it in return an extra leverage in securing guarantees (from France, first and foremost) on territorial security issues. This illustrates that there is no competition between NATO and the EU or other formats, but also that countries for whom territorial security is on the top of the list of concerns can gain from engaging with formats that create security in the area of crisis management, for example. This is also very much part and parcel of the understanding and application of strategic autonomy, and should represent a model for the smaller V4 countries. Smaller countries will also have to start thinking about whether they can accept a level of specialization in both their armies and defense industries, which is another important building block of strategic autonomy: ensuring the rationalization and streamlining national defense industries in order to move towards a greater efficiency in order to fulfill the needs set out in EU and NATO planning processes.

Beyond the immediately identifiable challenges that the EU will have to face and that have been described above, there is also an urgent need for the EU to upgrade its planning processes, which may well be the ultimate building block of strategic autonomy. Given the importance of technological superiority in modern contingencies, of the cost of weapons and the very long time span necessary for their production, defense planning has become a crucial element in the preparedness and efficiency of armies

nowadays. And there can be no efficient European defense planning without a (set of) key document(s) that outline the EU's level of ambition. However, that would also require a small revolution at the level of member states, who would have to accept that European planning would take precedence over their national (and for some, NATO) efforts. This will be a key element in ensuring that Europe moves from cooperation to integration.

Translated at the political-military level, completing these core tasks will also require some extra work for politicians and military planners. Defining the proper military level of ambition is a first step that is currently being undertaken, but that should be followed by a follow-up work which would take the form of a EU White

Paper on defense and security, that would define EU strategic interests for all EU member states, and sanctuarize this level of ambition for foreseeable future. This could very well be a priority for the next Commission, especially the next HRVP, provided member states participate with goodwill into the process. It seems that the V4 will face an uphill battle in creating unity on this front, given the relatively different starting positions. However, France will play a key role in setting the tone and showing openness towards the positions of other countries, in order to dispel any lingering feeling that France is shaping strategic autonomy to fit its own strategic and industrial interests.



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