



STRATEGIC AUTONOMY: NOT WITHOUT INTEGRATION

SUMMARY

One dimension of strategic autonomy has been firmly decided upon since the EU created its Common Security and Defence Policy in 1999: the projection of military force outside the borders of the EU. That is also the dimension that must, and can, be acted upon in the very short term.

Autonomy is a mindset. An actor that does not think autonomously will never act autonomously, regardless of its capabilities. Five components of that mindset are essential. First, member states must see the EU is a great power, in the same league as the US, Russia, and China. Second, the EU must take the lead in stabilising its own periphery – nobody will do that for it. Third, the only meaningful level of ambition remains the Headline Goal of up to 60,000 troops. Fourth, autonomy can only be achieved in a European grouping, not by any member state alone. Finally, autonomy requires integration of national forces, not just interoperability between them. While the weak argue amongst themselves – Do we have strategic autonomy? Do we want strategic autonomy? – the strong exercise their autonomy. There is no time to waste, therefore.

Those member states that share this mindset can create a set of permanent multinational formations, with national brigades, ships, and air squadrons as building-blocks. They can do that now, so that when the EU adopts its Strategic Compass in March 2022, it can unveil a real capability initiative at the same time.



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A definition by way of introduction

'Autonomy' has been the objective of the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) from the start. "The Union must 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 without prejudice to actions by NATO". This is the foundational text of the CSDP, adopted by the European Council meeting in Cologne in June 1999. In December of that same year, in Helsinki, the European Council translated it into a military level of ambition, the Headline Goal. The EU should be able to deploy up to corps level (up to 15 brigades or 50,000 to 60,000 troops) within 60 days, and to sustain that deployment for at least one year.

The exact term 'strategic autonomy' that dominates the debate about the CSDP today was not used, but the scope was very clear: the EU must be able to project military force outside its borders, alone when necessary, for all types of operations, in any scenario short of the invocation of the collective defence guarantee in NATO's Article 5. This is what the member states decided in 1999. In the future, 'strategic autonomy' may include more if the member states so decide – notably a larger role for defence planning and military operations under the EU flag for the "protection" of Europe. Member states would have to clarify, however, what exactly this rather imprecise term, introduced by the 2016 Global Strategy, entails. The Lisbon Treaty in a way went further and provided a legal basis for the collective territorial defence of Europe (Article 42.7). But member states have not operationalised this, and the

Treaty moreover spells out that for those that are also members of NATO, the latter "remains the foundation of their collective defence and the forum for its implementation".

Confusingly, the same term of 'strategic autonomy' is now also being used for the EU's broad economic role, in trade, but also in areas such as industrial policy, research and technology, energy, and cyber policy.¹ However, the EU, and the European Economic Community before it, has always been an autonomous economic player – one of the world's three biggest players, in fact, and in many areas even a supranational actor. EU defence industrial policy is obviously an integral part of this economic role. The term 'strategic autonomy' ought to have been avoided, because in the economic realm there is no autonomy to be gained, only sovereignty to be maintained and supranational policies to be strengthened. This is contrary to the military field, in which for decades European states have undertaken operations only under the flag of NATO or the United Nations or, of course, under their national flag – and in which they remain heavily dependent on US support to deploy their forces.

There is a strong argument to be made that an actor which does not assume more responsibility for its own territorial defence cannot truly be autonomous in the military sphere. But this paper will focus only on the dimension of what will be called 'strategic autonomy' – as it is the established term – that has already been firmly decided: the projection of military force outside the borders of the EU. This is also the dimension that must, and can, be acted upon in the very short term.

1. For a good overview, see Frédéric Mauro (2021) 'Europe's Strategic Autonomy: That Obscure Object of Desire', Analysis No. 13, IRIS, Paris, October.

Strategic autonomy is urgent

Military power projection is, in fact, the most urgent dimension. The shift of focus of the grand strategy of the United States – from Europe to Asia – also has implications for territorial defence and NATO. In the case of simultaneous crises in Asia and Europe, the US is increasingly likely to prioritise the former. American reinforcements may therefore arrive in Europe later, and in smaller numbers, than NATO has envisaged until now. Within NATO, the European allies would thus be well advised to strengthen their conventional capabilities. Nevertheless, the US commitment to NATO and the balance of power is such that deterrence remains effective, and direct aggression against the Alliance by another power remains unlikely – for now.

In stark contrast, the broad neighbourhood of the EU – stretching from the Sahel, through the Horn of Africa, the Middle East, and the Gulf, to the Caucasus and eastern Europe – has become ever more unstable since the CSDP was created in 1999. Years before, when the cold war ended, the US had already made it clear that although it would continue its commitment to collective territorial defence in NATO, this did not mean it would automatically intervene in non-Article 5 scenarios around Europe: crises in which European interests may be at stake but that do not directly threaten the territory of EU or NATO member states. “We don’t have a dog in that fight”, US Secretary of State James Baker said in 1991 about the civil war in former Yugoslavia.² If anything, the US attitude has hardened. Due

to its preoccupation with China, the US appears less and less willing to intervene in Europe’s neighbourhood. It may even become reluctant to support Europeans with strategic enablers when the latter deploy – or Washington may start charging for the use of its enablers, such as transport and intelligence assets. Even when Americans and Europeans deploy together, the US may not always take European interests into account, as its lack of coordination with European allies when evacuating Afghanistan in the summer of 2021 demonstrated.

The fact is, however, that without American support, Europeans struggle to project significant military power, even on their doorstep. In terms of capability development, the harsh reality is that the CSDP has failed. EU member states have made little or no progress in addressing the priority capability shortfalls that they have now identified several times since 1999. In many areas, they even have less capability now than when the CSDP took off. Since many (though not all) of the same areas are NATO targets as well, ipso facto the Alliance too has failed. The conclusion can only be that the EU now very urgently needs a “capacity for autonomous action”. The adoption of strategic guidelines for the CSDP, a so-called Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, envisaged by the European Council for March 2022, is the occasion to do what it takes to make this a reality.

2. George F. Will (1995) ‘A Dog in that Fight?’, *Newsweek*, 6 November.

Precondition: an autonomous mindset

Strategic autonomy obviously demands military capabilities, as well as apt decision-making structures. But most importantly, autonomy is a mindset. An actor that does not think autonomously will never act autonomously, regardless of its capabilities. This is, in fact, the core of any grand strategy: how do you understand your role in the world?³ Unfortunately, this is precisely the issue on which the EU is fundamentally divided. Many member states consider the EU's primary role in international politics to be that of faithful ally to the US, and they have little or no conception of any autonomous role.

If the EU wants to achieve strategic autonomy, it is a precondition that the institutions and the member states integrate the following five elements into their strategic thinking.

The EU is a great power

The EU is a global player in the same league as the US, China and Russia: an independent pole of a multipolar world. If the EU does not play in that league, it will become a playground for competition and rivalry between these three powers, and the EU will not be able to safeguard its vital interests. That the majority of EU member states are, through NATO, allies of one of these powers, the US, ought not to detract from their independence or that of the EU, as long as they understand that even in an alliance, one has to look after one's own interests. An alliance does not replace one's capabilities but complements them if and when they prove insufficient. This is why, logically, NATO is not the first responder

when European but not American interests are at stake, as in most non-Article 5 scenarios in the European periphery. Given that it is beyond the powers of any individual European state to deal completely alone with such crises, it is only the EU that can be an effective first responder. Of course, even a great power like the EU, and its individual members, can still maintain a defensive alliance with another power, the US, as a guarantee. But they cannot rely on that other power to permanently stabilise their own neighbourhood in their place.

The EU must take the lead in stabilising its own periphery

In the EU's broad neighbourhood to the south, but also vis-à-vis the buffer states in between the EU and Russia in the east, the primary aim is not to deter direct military aggression against the EU. Nor is the aim usually to defeat an adversary – the self-declared Islamic State was an exception. Instead, the objective is stability, in order to prevent security threats from spilling over and putting the EU's interests at risk. Where neighbouring states are torn by internal conflict, this does not call for victory, but for compromise between parties that have to continue to live together.⁴ Where neighbours are under pressure from outside powers (such as Russia), this requires strengthening their resilience (while NATO deters Russia militarily and the EU does it economically). Military power projection is a key dimension, but also just one dimension of a much broader strategy for the neighbours that comprises crucial political and economic objectives. With its comprehensive

3. Sven Biscop (2021) *Grand Strategy in 10 Words. A Guide to Great Power Politics in the 21st Century*, Bristol: Bristol University Press.

4. Sir Rupert Smith (2019) *The Utility of Force. The Art of War in the Modern World*, London: Penguin, 2nd Edition, p. 425.

toolbox, the EU is well-placed to deliver such a strategy. The EU must unequivocally take the lead, therefore, in stabilising its periphery. This requires a frank strategic debate about exactly which EU interests may require which type of military action in which scenario. The EU is still to have this debate; if the Strategic Compass does not address it, the adoption of this Strategic Compass ought to be the occasion to launch it. In any case, whenever direct military intervention is the only way of safeguarding the European interest, the EU must be able and willing to act, across the entire spectrum of violence – in other words, it must have the expeditionary mindset.

The level of ambition is the Headline Goal

Formally, the EU's military level of ambition remains the 1999 Headline Goal, but in reality it has been overshadowed by the Battlegroup scheme – although this was only ever meant to be the specific rapid response element of the larger force. Yet even for rapid response, the Battlegroups are of limited use. Including all support capabilities, a Battlegroup may number 1500 to 2000 troops, but its combat capacity is an infantry battalion of 500 to 600, which is insufficient to be able to deal with most contingencies. In the context of the Strategic Compass, an “EU Rapid Deployment Capacity” of up to 5000 troops has now been proposed – that is, a brigade. But too often this is interpreted in a minimal way: the 27 member states each contributing small-scale national capabilities to form a single multinational brigade. Most member states have at least one brigade in their armies, however, so they do not require an EU structure to play at brigade level. Moreover, sustaining a deployment over time demands at least three brigades, so that

they can rotate throughout the year, while multiple contingencies may, of course, demand simultaneous deployments (such as when EU member states had to evacuate people from Afghanistan while deployed in Mali). The only meaningful level of ambition, therefore, is still the level defined in 1999: a pool of brigades or, in one word, a corps. Any level of ambition lower than that will not allow the EU to deal autonomously with all non-Article 5 scenarios in its own neighbourhood.

Autonomy can only be achieved in a European grouping

There are only a very few EU member states that can still deploy the equivalent of several brigades abroad, but they cannot long sustain that effort, and they require other states to contribute supporting capabilities. Most member states struggle to sustain even a battalion beyond their borders. In the military field, national strategic autonomy was lost a long time ago. And it cannot be regained: having cut many capabilities, no European state can afford to re-establish the wide range of capabilities that power projection – in any number that matters – demands. Strategic autonomy at a meaningful level of ambition – that is, a corps – can only be achieved at the European level, either by the EU as such or, as an intermediate step, by a subset of EU member states. European strategic autonomy is not, however, achieved at the expense of national autonomy – you cannot lose what you no longer have. Rather, after a long lapse, autonomy can be recreated by pooling European efforts.

Autonomy requires integration

Since there is not a single EU member state that now has the scale to maintain the full range of capabilities, enhancing interoperability between national capabilities will not be sufficient to achieve strategic autonomy. Nor will cooperation on procurement of arms and equipment be, if it is geared only to equipping national forces. Instead, national forces must be integrated into permanent multinational formations that constitute comprehensive force packages: an army corps as per the Headline

Implementation: military integration

European military integration does not necessarily mean creating a European army – that is, dissolving national armed forces and recruiting troops on the payroll of the EU. Strategic autonomy can also be achieved by maintaining national capabilities, but as building blocks of permanent multinational formations. All combined, these national building blocks have to constitute a comprehensive full-spectrum force package; the forces of each individual member state no longer need to.

How would this work? With a few exceptions, all member states' armies still comprise at least one brigade. Many of these brigades are incomplete, however: they lack several of the combat support and combat service support capabilities that ought to make up a brigade, such as air defence, combat engineers and, crucially, logistics. Consequently, in many scenarios these brigades are unusable. In an age when commercial drones are being weaponised, a brigade without air defence, for example, cannot be deployed. Furthermore, not every brigade can be trained for operations of every nature.

Goal, but also a navy fleet, and an air group. These can then be equipped, through common capability projects, with multinational enablers. Under the motto “train as you fight”, these corps, fleets and groups should organise regular manoeuvres involving all constituent units, in order to forge them into a modular but single unit. From such a multinational formation, an effective multinational fighting force can be generated for a specific operation. That will always be highly difficult, and thus risky for the troops involved, from disparate national units. Clearly, the way ahead, is military integration.

By anchoring national brigades into a multinational corps, these deficiencies can be remedied. The corps will comprise brigades that share an expeditionary outlook, but of a different nature – for example, paratroopers, mountain, motorised – so that every contingency is covered. At corps level, a division of labour can be instituted between the contributing states and/or capabilities can be merged, so as to provide the full complement of combat support and combat service support. Every constituent brigade (or elements of it) thus becomes employable in almost every scenario, supported by these corps-level capabilities. Moreover, arms and equipment but also doctrine can gradually be harmonised between the national brigades. As stated above, the national brigades must obviously train together as a corps. Over time, this will result in deep interoperability: brigades will continue to wear national uniform and be composed of citizens of one EU member state, but actually individual soldiers or platoons will be able to move from one brigade to another with almost no friction. At that point, the corps will truly be a single unit.

One option, however, would be to create one new brigade on an entirely European footing, not unlike the '28th army' that the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) proposed in 2020.⁵ What the SPD put forward, in fact, is not an army, but a brigade: a multinational unit recruiting soldiers from all EU member states (similar to the French *Légion Étrangère*) directly onto the payroll of the EU. There would be little point in creating a single, free-standing brigade – without support and enablers, this would be well-nigh unemployable. As a brigade within a corps, however, what one could then baptise '1st European Brigade' could be a worthwhile military and political experiment, and the potential nucleus of more truly European units.

Two differences with the Battlegroup scheme, apart from the scale, are essential. First, this must be a standing corps (that is, the national brigades are permanently assigned to the multinational corps) whereas every Battlegroup is dissolved after its standby period. Second, this is precisely not a standby force (that is, neither the corps as a whole nor any individual brigade is available exclusively to the EU for a fixed period of time). Instead, every brigade in the corps must be worked up to a permanently high degree of readiness, so that when an operation is decided upon, a tailored force can quickly be generated. Such a tailored force for a specific operation does not necessarily have to comprise an entire national brigade: as interoperability within the corps deepens, it will become easier to combine elements of various national brigades into a coherent fighting force. Not every contributing state therefore has to contribute with combat

forces to every operation; but all the personnel in the supporting structures have to do their job at all times.

The EU already undertakes maritime operations, and in the debate on the Strategic Compass, EU air operations are mentioned for the first time. A multinational fleet and a multinational air group can indeed be created along the same lines as a multinational army corps. In their navies and air forces, the majority of member states have much more limited capabilities than in their armies. For some, the building blocks that they contribute to a multinational fleet will be individual national ships rather than a flotilla. The building block of a multinational air group will likely be the squadron (typically 12 to 24 aircraft).

By means of such military integration, the EU can thus create an army corps as well as an air group geared to expeditionary operations in its broad neighbourhood, where the EU must take the lead. The area of focus for direct military intervention is the southern flank, but military cooperation with eastern neighbours can also be an instrument of EU strategy.⁶ In the naval domain, a fleet focused on the projection of stability in the Mediterranean and the western Indian Ocean can be created. Such integrative schemes bear fruit over time, but they can be started right now. In the land domain especially, an initiative can still be launched to coincide with the adoption of the Strategic Compass, whose credibility will hugely benefit from being accompanied by a real capability initiative.

5. SPD Bundestagsfraktion (2020) [Diskussionspapier 28. Armee](#), Berlin, 6 October.

6. Iulian Romanyshyn (2021) 'Breaking the Law of Opposite Effects: Europe's Strategic Autonomy and the Revived Transatlantic Partnership', Security Policy Brief No. 140, Egmont Institute, Brussels, March.

Differentiation: a head start outside EU structures?

Implicitly, the EU has committed to this military integration project through Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). When cooperation becomes permanent and structured, it becomes integration. When launching PESCO in 2017, the Council stated that its aim could be (though not that it is) to create a comprehensive full-spectrum force package. In any case, one of the binding PESCO commitments to which the 25 participating EU member states (all but Denmark and Malta) signed up is to make available “strategically deployable formations”. And indeed, one of the PESCO projects envisages a modular force package: the EUFOR Crisis Response Operation Core (CROC). So far six member states have joined the CROC (Cyprus, France, Germany, Greece, Italy and Spain). Their level of ambition is too low, however: a single multinational brigade composed of national elements. For the CROC to be meaningful, it ought to envisage the corps level from the start. More importantly, member states must develop the CROC into an actual force, with identified brigades assigned to it. For now, they regard it merely as a tool for drawing up scenarios and catalogues of theoretically available forces.

Effective military integration is nonetheless taking place in Europe, but in smaller constellations, outside the EU framework. Some initiatives are geared more to territorial defence, notably those centred on Germany. Others have a more expeditionary flavour.

Belgian-Dutch naval cooperation is a perfect example of how today the approach outlined above already works in the maritime domain. In this case, the national building blocks are

frigates and minehunters. Ships sail under a national flag with a national crew, but most other functions have either been merged into binational capabilities (such as a single naval operations school) or are provided by one nation for both navies. The Netherlands, for example, provides crew training and maintenance for all frigates, and Belgium for all minehunters. In theory, the two countries could undo this integration again, but in reality they cannot, for neither can afford to recreate the capacity to undertake all the tasks that are now done by the other, or by a binational entity.

An example from the land domain also involves Belgium, which in 2018 signed an intergovernmental agreement with France on the *Capacité Motorisée* (CaMo) project, linking the Belgian Motorised Brigade with the French *Armée de Terre*. Belgium is acquiring French vehicles, but more than this, Belgium and France are jointly developing the doctrine for the use of the new platforms. They will thus effectively achieve deep interoperability, down to platoon level, so that the Belgian brigade will mirror its French counterparts in everything except uniforms. In theory, Belgian and French crews should be able to swap vehicles and operate them immediately. The next step could be to permanently anchor the Belgian brigade more firmly in French divisional and corps structures, and to realign the support units into a coherent whole as described above.

Ideally, however, such integrative schemes would unite more than two member states, otherwise there is a certain risk that integration between two states of very different size leads

to the armed forces of the smaller one being reduced to an appendage of the bigger. If a scheme such as CaMo involved four or five countries instead of two, it would immediately acquire a much stronger European flavour. And it would create more flexibility, bringing together expeditionary-minded brigades of various types, while enhancing the opportunities for synergies and effects of scale.

The challenge is to establish a group of EU member states that have integrated the five elements of strategic autonomy listed above into their strategic mindset – it will in any case not be possible to launch an initiative with all 27 on board (or with all 25 PESCO countries). Such a group may, in fact, not exist at this stage, because even the member state that is most strongly in favour of strategic autonomy, France, has always rejected the last element: that it requires integration. The French view of *l'Europe puissance* remains strictly intergovernmental. Until this changes and cooperation between national forces remains the norm, the integrative quantum leap that alone can make real strategic autonomy possible, will not happen. Nevertheless, as the EU member state with the strongest armed forces and the most expeditionary mindset, France must be at the heart of any scheme – so must Germany, because only the Franco-German engine can drive the EU in the area of defence, as in most other areas. Crucially, Germany and France have the two largest defence industries in the EU.

France has in effect created a very promising framework, including Germany, albeit outside the EU framework: the European Intervention Initiative (EI2). Launched in 2018, EI2 aims not at integrating military capabilities, but at increasing the willingness of the now 13 members to deploy together. Participating

states opt to join one or more working groups (such as on the Sahel, the Caribbean, power projection or terrorism) in order to forge a prior common understanding of the joint action that they might potentially undertake if a crisis were to occur in one of these areas. Put differently, via the EI2 France hopes to create a pool of able and willing partners to build ad hoc coalitions for French-led military interventions.

At the same time, however, the members of EI2 could begin to implement military integration among them along the lines outlined above, notably in the land domain. The Franco-Belgian cooperation could be one pillar of a multinational corps, to which other EI2 members could also contribute an expeditionary-oriented brigade, and combat support and combat service support elements. EI2 currently includes Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Very few of these share all five elements of the strategic mindset outlined above. Two are not EU member states, and the UK for its part is highly unlikely to participate in any form of military integration. But even if just a subset of the EI2 countries launched military integration in the land domain, that would constitute a great step forward, while the entire EI2 membership continues to work on scenario-building and advanced planning.

In the air domain, an integrative scheme in the context of EI2 is more difficult because of the different platforms that countries use (whereas within an army corps important synergies can be achieved in terms of completing combat support and combat service support even if national brigades operate different equipment). The EI2 countries that will acquire the F35, however, could launch an integrative scheme between them, establish a multinational air

group, and coordinate with France (flying the *Rafale*), so as to establish an expeditionary-minded air capacity. The E12 countries could similarly explore opportunities to bring part of their naval assets closer together in a task group or fleet geared to stabilising the southern periphery of Europe.

Consolidation: linking up defence initiatives

If E12 could be at the centre of an integrative project to achieve strategic autonomy, steps must also be taken to ensure that it becomes the driver of a broader effort, rather than remaining an isolated core.

For one, after a multinational corps has been established within E12 and proven its effectiveness, it ought at a later stage to be merged with the CROC. This would, on the one hand, require the participating E12 countries to formally join the CROC, and on the other hand, it would require all six countries currently in the CROC to contribute a brigade to the corps as well, or consent to withdraw. It would certainly improve coherence and strengthen the EU politically if E12 as a capability initiative was brought under the aegis of PESCO. It would also be very beneficial for its work on scenarios and advanced planning to be fed into the EU as a whole – this too is one of the elements on the table in the framework of the Strategic Compass, and it would not prevent the E12 countries from acting as a coalition of the willing outside the EU framework for actual operations if they so prefer. (Of course, if they wanted to deploy under the EU flag, it would require a Council decision).

In a similar vein, if integrated naval and air formations are created by the E12 countries or another subset of EU member states, they

If the six members of the CROC cannot find agreement to actually start operationalising their project, E12 could thus provide an alternative core, outside the formal EU structures, to kick-start military integration at the European level – that is, beyond the existing bilateral initiatives.

can become PESCO projects. The added value of PESCO does not lie in multinational procurement projects (60 so far) that serve to equip national units – for which member states now use PESCO almost exclusively – because since 2004 member states have been able to do this through the European Defence Agency (EDA). Moreover, the European Defence Fund (EDF) now offers a much more promising platform for joint procurement, because the Commission manages it in the interest of the EU as a whole. PESCO should therefore focus on its core function: creating a set of permanent multinational formations that together make up a comprehensive full spectrum force package for expeditionary operations.

In addition to army corps, navy fleets and air groups, these multinational formations must include the strategic enablers that are needed to deploy. Priority areas are space-based communication; long and medium range unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), including armed UAVs; strategic air and sea lift; medical role 2 facilities; counter-UAV and missile defence. The states that contribute brigades to a corps, for example, can decide to create a multinational armed UAV capability and initiate an EDF project to design and build the platform. Once industry delivers, the states can follow up with a PESCO project to procure the UAVs

and to create a permanent multinational UAV fleet. Instead of dividing up the UAVs between the states that funded the EDF project, they can be operated as a single fleet, with one multinational structure for command and control, maintenance, logistics, and training. Also, when member states that make up a multinational corps, fleet or group decide to harmonise the equipment of the constituent national units, they can also propose EDF projects to develop the future platforms for their manoeuvre units. The Future Combat Air System (FCAS) – that is, the next generation European combat aircraft – could be one of these. All of these EDF projects can easily be opened to all EU member states, even if they do not contribute to any multinational corps, fleet or group. In this way EDF and PESCO projects can be aligned and can be geared directly to firm capability decisions by member states, with clear deadlines.

Another existing structure that can be rendered more directly useful by linking it up with a permanent multinational corps is the Eurocorps. This is a permanent multinational headquarters in Strasbourg, with a permanent multinational support brigade. When Eurocorps was created in 1992, actual units were also assigned to it: French, German and Spanish divisions and a Belgian brigade (including a Luxembourg element) but this link has since been cut. Making Eurocorps the permanent HQ of a new corps would thus be a return to its roots, except that it would now command expeditionary-oriented brigades, while originally the founding nations assigned heavy armoured units to it.

That said, and as mentioned above, integration

is also taking place in capability areas that are geared more to territorial defence. One example is the German-Netherlands Corps, created as far back as 1995. The corps headquarters is binational, with a staff support battalion and a communication and information-systems (CIS) battalion with mixed German and Dutch personnel. Among the units assigned to the corps is the German 1st Panzer Division, which includes one Dutch brigade (the 43rd Mechanised Brigade). This brigade in turn includes one mixed German–Dutch tank battalion that operates the only tank capacity in the Dutch army. Germany is also increasing cooperation between its armour and several eastern European states in the context of NATO’s Framework Nation Concept (FNC). It would make eminent sense to apply the same integrationist method in this area, and to propose EDF and PESCO projects accordingly. The Main Combat Ground System (MCGS) – that is, the future main battle tank – could, for example, become another flagship project alongside FCAS. Although requirements in these capability areas would be driven by NATO rather than by the EU, legally it is perfectly possible, in fact, to make use of the EDF and PESCO to generate capabilities for territorial defence.

Over time, several European groupings, with partially overlapping membership, could thus emerge – some focused on expeditionary operations, others on territorial defence, and still others on enablers.⁷ The beauty is that so much has to be done that every European country can make a useful contribution without having to do something that goes against its inclination. The only condition is that every contribution must be a piece of the same puzzle – if different states

7. For a similar approach, see Dick Zandee (2021) ‘European Defence. Specialisation by Capability Groups’, Policy Brief, Clingendael, The Hague, October.

are laying different puzzles, no comprehensive set of forces will emerge, and gaps in and overlaps between European arsenals will remain.

To that end, EU and NATO defence planning and capability development need to be more closely aligned.⁸ In the area of military force projection outside the borders of the EU, EU member states must not adapt to NATO planning, because they have precisely decided (back in 1999) to achieve autonomy. Instead, NATO must take the EU's Headline Goal (and any future iteration of it) as a given, and incorporate it into the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) as a binding collective target for those NATO Allies (and Partners) that are EU member states. When countries decide to build a multinational corps, fleet or group, or a multinational enabler, through

the EU, to achieve the Headline Goal, this must be apportioned to their individual NDPP targets. In this way, the NDPP will create a capability mix that allows the NATO Allies (and Partners) that are EU member states to take their place in the line for territorial defence and to have a capacity for autonomous crisis management at the same time. Moreover, in many capability areas (notably the very expensive strategic enablers) this collective approach is anyway the only one that can deliver results. The purely national approach of the NDPP, setting targets for individual Allies, has long been obsolete because the European countries have long lost the scale required to generate strategic enablers in meaningful numbers and in a cost-effective way. It is thus only by putting EU and NATO targets at the same level that states will take both seriously and actually achieve them.

Conclusion

While the weak argue amongst themselves – Do we have strategic autonomy? Do we want strategic autonomy? – the strong exercise their autonomy. Everything that this paper proposes is eminently feasible, from a practical point of view. The only reasons why EU member states are not doing what they long ago *decided* to do (to stress this again) are political. The only way of breaking through this is by acting. A subset of

EU member states can take the lead, even today, and just do it. If they are successful, others will join. Creating a core group only makes sense, however, if from the start it is integrated more deeply than the EU as a whole. There is no point in organising a subset only to disagree among five or ten instead of among 27, and still to stay stuck. Strategic autonomy in defence, just like in the economic realm, demands integration.

8. For a creative view on EU-NATO relations, see Jo Coelmont (2021) 'Seven Steps to European Defence, Transatlantic Equilibrium, and Global Europe', Security Policy Brief No. 151, Egmont Institute, Brussels, October.

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STRATEGIC
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STEPS TOWARDS A MORE
AUTONOMOUS EU EXTERNAL
ACTION**



ABSTRACT

This policy paper analyses several institutional and policymaking priorities conducive to a more strategic autonomy agenda for the whole of EU external action. It departs from two different understandings of strategic autonomy: the geopolitical understanding, on which most political efforts have been placed so far, and an institutional/operational understanding, where substantial work remains to be done. The policy paper reviews three recurrent institutional shortcomings for strategic autonomy: the political analysis at the EU level and the need for more flexible institutional responses; the divisive and often-distracting discussions on QMV in the field of foreign and security policy; and a limiting focus on security and defence when it comes to implementing strategic autonomy as a policy priority. The final section provides some policy options to advance the EU's strategic autonomy agenda, in line with its operational purposes, namely broadening the focus of discussions on strategic autonomy to the whole of EU external action; securing the buy-in of member states in processes and policies leading to more strategic autonomy; promoting thematic and regional steps forward in its operationalisation; fostering political consensus at the highest level; promoting a strategic autonomy esprit de corps; and enhancing the institutional tools, methods and capabilities for more strategic autonomy in the field of EU external action.

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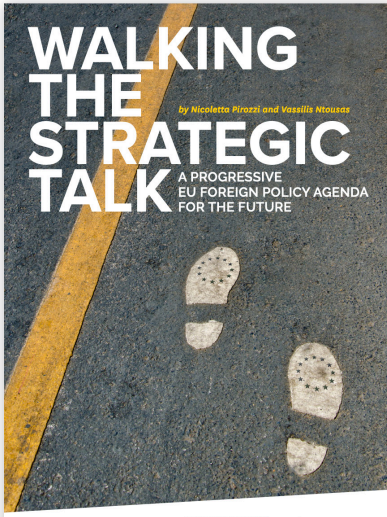
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March 2021

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**A EUROPEAN HEALTH UNION
AS THE WAY FORWARD
FOR THE HEALTH OF
THE CONTINENT**

SUMMARY

The ongoing health crisis has highlighted the limits of existing European integration policies, with their emphasis on the development of the internal market while marginalising what most Europeans consider most important: saving lives and promoting health and wellbeing.

The Social Democrat position paper of 12 May 2020 entitled 'A European Health Union – increasing EU competence in health – coping with COVID-19 and looking to the future' has opened a new chapter in the European project.

With the pooling of European resources for the prefinancing of research and public procurement of vaccines proving to be more efficient in comparison to competitive bidding by the member states, Europeans will be the first to feel the benefits of a European Health Union (EHU). The potential scope for further actions within the EHU is vast, with some avenues for moving forward being clear. However, the risk of a return to a policy where the EU does not act remains.

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