



IN SEARCH OF EUROPEAN STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

Three conditions and five dilemmas

Lorenzo VAI

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Rue Montoyer 25

1000 Brussels

Belgium

Web: www.iedonline.eu

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper deals with the subject of EU strategic autonomy, the current cornerstone of European political and public debate. The article is divided into three parts. The first describes the genesis and development of the idea of strategic autonomy, from the vision promoted by President De Gaulle to the most recent developments. The second part explores some aspects of the concept: what it means; what are the essential conditions for its realization; and to which political areas does it apply. Finally, in the third part, five trade-offs – or dilemmas – of a political nature are presented that encompass the reflections concerning the strengthening of Europe’s capacity for action. The paper examines alternatives that are certainly very current, and that must be kept in mind whenever the search for autonomy requires political compromises, which is almost always.

Social Media summary

Internal EU issues related to the exercise of its decision-making power are at the heart of the debate on strategic autonomy. The problems are not exclusively with regard to the competences assigned to Brussels or the related decision-making procedures, but also involve the shortcomings and divergences between the 27 different political wills.

Keywords

#StrategicAutonomy # Atlanticism #consectetuer

Short bio

Lorenzo Vai is a Diplomat and works at the Policy Planning Unit of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.



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1. Introduction

“70 years after the founding fathers, European strategic autonomy is goal number one for our generation. For Europe, this is the real start of the 21st Century.” [1]

The words quoted were spoken by the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, at the Brussels Economic Forum on the 8th of September 2020. President Michel’s entire speech hinged on the concept of strategic autonomy and on the role the Recovery Plan can play in strengthening it. It is not the first time that the issue has arisen in the European political-institutional debate, but it is the first time that it has been raised as a primary objective for Europe. It is a significant statement for an idea that has been building up for a long time. It is a concept that is elusive and divisive in many respects, yet one that has grown in importance in recent years, to the point of becoming a buzzword.

Brought back into the spotlight in 2016 by the EU Global Strategy, the subject of strategic autonomy first captured the attention of analysts before doing the same to political decision-makers. However, the breadth that the debate has taken on does not seem to have dissolved many of the doubts and dissonances that the term brings with it. The conceptual boundaries of the issue appear, in fact, to be still searching for a clear and shared definition among all the Member States (MS) of the Union [2]. This is a state of indeterminacy that is partly acceptable (and even desirable) in order to prevent the existing differences outweighing the convergences, but which risks transforming the terms of the discussion into empty slogans, rendered ineffectual by their vagueness. Thus, despite using the same terms and sharing the same discourse, personal interpretations of what is meant by “strategic autonomy” may well not coincide, with obvious consequences for the definition of strategies, priorities, objectives and choices [3].

The long list of contributions from the world of think-tanks and academia [4], as well as studies and interventions attributable to the world of European institutions [5], have addressed the issue of strategic autonomy by trying to define its terms and the political contexts in play, illustrating their rationale and possible applications. Less attention seems to have been paid (except perhaps tangentially) to the problems facing efforts to achieve greater strategic autonomy. Specifically, so far there has been no systematic approach to dealing with appeals for greater autonomy, and to the political alternatives public decision-makers are considering.

These alternatives can come in the shape of trade-offs and can represent very real dilemmas. Knowledge of the conditions and alternatives in play is essential for the evaluation and definition of policy initiatives regarding strategic autonomy, while also being useful when conducting the negotiations related to such initiatives.

This paper examines the genesis and development of the concept of strategic autonomy at the heart of the process of European integration, from the ‘60s to the present day. The second part deals with the meaning of the concept of autonomy, highlighting the three conditions required to fully achieve it. The third part goes on to describe the main political dilemmas that have arisen in the political debate on the issue.

2. The Birth of the Concept

The idea of being able to enjoy “freedom to make decisions and take action” within and despite the limits (direct or indirect) imposed by States outside Europe can be traced back to the French



President Charles de Gaulle and his search for greater room for manoeuvre for France in the bipolar system dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union. This search for autonomy took shape – in terms of military capacity – with the creation of France’s own nuclear arsenal and – on a political level – with France’s withdrawal from the NATO military command structure. This idea, which was thus born in the national context, then underwent efforts to introject it into the process of European integration, with the proposals included in the Fouchet Plans, in 1961 and 1962. The objective of the two plans promoted by De Gaulle was to launch a federal integration project capable of circumscribing the supranational cooperation launched within the EEC, reducing British influence within the continent’s political-economic cooperation and creating an alternative military cooperation forum to NATO (and therefore to the USA). It was a vision of “autonomy” that was clearly tied to French national interests. Thus, the concept of strategic autonomy has its place of birth in France and a political sphere of reference in the area of defence. These dual aspects have come back into focus in the current European debate.

In the following years, the process of European integration was channelled along the lines of economic cooperation, putting aside the most sensitive political issues and with them the need for a more autonomous Europe in the field of defence and, more generally, of foreign policy. The issue was back on the agenda in the ‘90s, after the Maastricht Treaty. That treaty extended the scope for cooperation, including foreign policy (in a more institutionalised manner than with the “European political cooperation” born in the ‘70s) among the pillars of the nascent European Union. In 1998, in the wake of developments in the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and, above all, as a result of the tragic failures experienced in the Balkans, French President Jacques Chirac and British Prime Minister Tony Blair released a joint declaration at the bilateral summit in Saint-Malo, which states that the EU 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”. This was the first step, a political one, towards the birth of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP, currently the Common Security and Defence Policy, CSDP), the operational branch of the CFSP.

In 2003, with the war in Iraq, the EU was fractured, with its MS moving in disparate directions. To bridge this rift and imbue the CFSP/CSPD with strategic direction, the first High Representative, Javier Solana, drew up the European Security Strategy [6]. That initiative seemed to herald greater European activism, but it did not go so far as to imagine an EU capable of acting alone, without the support of its partners, primarily NATO and the United States. It was President Chirac and Chancellor Schröder who dared to envisage a truly autonomous EU. In April 2003, France and Germany – with the backing of Belgium and Luxembourg – proposed the creation of a joint command for European military operations. Its headquarters were to be established in Tervuren, which would have ensured the EU greater operational autonomy from NATO structures. This plan met with British resistance and a moody reception from the United States, which effectively blocked its implementation.

2.1 Relaunching European Global Strategy

Like a karst river, the theme of strategic autonomy re-emerged in 2016, thanks to the European Global Strategy, (EUGS), the new EU foreign action strategy, which updates and expands the previous document by Solana. A lot of things had changed in Europe over those thirteen years, which now faced new international dynamics and new problems, from economic difficulties to



challenges for stability and security, both internal and foreign. It is in this new context that the EUGS explicitly states, “an adequate level of ambition and strategic autonomy is important for Europe’s ability to promote peace and security within and beyond its borders” [7]. This statement is crystallised into a clear objective in the document: “the EU will systematically encourage cooperation in defence matters and will work to create a solid European defence industry, one that is essential for Europe’s autonomy at both the decision-making and operational levels” [8].

In the EUGS, strategic autonomy remains limited to the area of defence, from both its decision-making and operational aspects. The text does not offer further details about the scope of the concept (which aspects of defence should it cover?

Should autonomy also cover security? Would increased operational capabilities make choices more autonomous, or would CFSP/CSDP decision-making procedures still need to be reformed?). However, two caveats need to be raised. First: the search for strategic autonomy is not at odds with the sovereignty that the different MS maintain in decisions on defence, although greater cooperation in this field must become the norm. Secondly: in terms of collective defence, NATO remains the main framework for most of the MS but attempts to deepen cooperation between NATO and the EU will have to respect the decision-making autonomy of both. Neither point is accidental, as they reflect the two great political problems – one internal and one external – that lie behind the affirmation of strategic autonomy. On the one hand, there is the risk that European autonomy will hinder national autonomy through the erosion of sovereignty, which can be noted as an internal problem relating to the nature of the EU and the development of its competences. On the other hand, there is the fear that there is a conflict between European strategic autonomy and the smooth progress of transatlantic relations exemplified by NATO: an external problem regarding the relations and expectations that individual MS have with regard to cooperation with Washington. Both issues continue to be at the centre of the European conversation on strategic autonomy today.

2.2 French Activism

After the publication of the EUGS, the idea that the EU should seek greater freedom of action began to gain prominence in debates and political views, with mixed fortunes. At a national level, the terminology of the EUGS was only taken up by France in its Defence and National Security Strategy Review of 2017, in which Paris (re)affirmed its intention to safeguard “its capability to decide and act alone to defend its interests [9] “in the field of defence policy [10].

Although the focus adopted in this case was national, it matches President Macron’s European vision, illustrated in that same year at the Sorbonne, in his speech on a new initiative for Europe: “only Europe can, in a word, guarantee genuine sovereignty or our ability to exist in today’s world to defend our values and interests” [11].

According to the French President, there is reciprocal positive influence between the advancement of European strategic autonomy and the defence of national sovereignty. This influence would allow the MS to pursue their own interests and safeguard their values more effectively compared to what they could achieve were they acting alone, without the EU.

The French position also introduces two noteworthy new considerations. In the field of defence, European strategic autonomy cannot be founded solely on greater operational capacity. What is needed above all is a “common strategic culture”, which can even be constructed from outside the



Community framework [12]. This is the premise from which the French President announced the launch of the European Intervention Initiative (EI2), a collaborative project between the Defence Ministries, aimed at a small number of European countries and at compensating for the lack of a shared strategic culture, with a view to joint or coordinated operations [13]. The EI2 was launched a few months before the activation of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) by the EU Council, on 11 December 2017. The closeness of the two dates is no coincidence. Indeed, after years of waiting, PESCO got under way with the aim of deepening cooperation among MS in the defence sector through joint projects for the development of European military capabilities. One of the main issues that emerged during the negotiations for PESCO, however, concerned the trade-off between inclusion and ambition. Having foreseen this, the Lisbon Treaty seemed to assign a significant level of ambition to PESCO, such as by restricting participation only to MS that “meet the highest criteria in terms of military capabilities and which have signed more binding commitments on the matter” [14]. This was an ambition that clashed with the political need to involve the largest number of MS possible in PESCO, many of whom were concerned about their possible exclusion. From the French point of view, this tension between opposing interests would have given rise to a PESCO that was somewhat disappointing compared to the expectations. Hence Macron’s attempt to seek European strategic autonomy by following other paths, outside the EU institutions and under clearer leadership from Paris [15].

The second noteworthy new consideration in France’s vision is the proposal to achieve greater conceptual scope. The concept proposed was, in Macron’s words, that of “European sovereignty”, the scope and implications of which are only partially superimposed on those of strategic autonomy. In addition, the political spheres considered were widened and extended: European sovereignty or autonomy does not only concern defence, but also the economy, technology, social issues, culture etc. The vision takes on a more holistic, but politically more sensitive dimension.

2.3 The Community’s Interpretation

If at the national level the concepts of autonomy and European strategic sovereignty have struggled to assert themselves [16], among the European institutions – thanks in part to Brexit and the Trump administration – they have found more fertile ground, with significant political repercussions [17]. The launch of the aforementioned PESCO, together with the establishment of the European Defence Fund (EDF) in 2017 and the introduction, that same year, of the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), were presented (and interpreted) as functional and synergistic initiatives to achieve greater strategic autonomy in the field of defence [18]. In 2018, however, the title given to the annual State of the Union speech delivered by then Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker left no room for doubt: The Hour of European Sovereignty:

“The geopolitical situation makes this Europe’s hour: the time for European sovereignty has come. It is time Europe took its destiny into its own hands. It is time Europe developed what I coined “Weltpolitikfähigkeit” – the capacity to play a role, as a Union, in shaping global affairs. Europe has to become a more sovereign actor in international relations. European sovereignty is born of Member States’ national sovereignty and does not replace it. Sharing sovereignty – when and where needed – makes each of our nation states stronger.” [19]

Juncker’s words echo the French point of view and, as with the latter, are keen to emphasise that European and national sovereignty don’t have to be at odds with each other. However, this



reflection does not add any details that might be useful in more precisely defining the contours of the evoked European sovereignty. What is evident is the Commission's attempt to extend the debate beyond the defence sector and therefore beyond the intergovernmental cooperation that governs the CFSP/CSDP.

The reasoning behind this vision can be traced back to dynamics that had begun to manifest themselves in the international system some years previously. This reasoning includes: the reduction in US military involvement in and around Europe, coupled with a wider deterioration in transatlantic relations; the weakening of multilateral cooperation; the return of power politics linked to the renewed activism of regional powers and embittered competition between China and the United States; the central role played by technological innovation and its ownership at national level. One significant event – which highlighted the limits placed by the international context on the EU's autonomy of action – was the US denunciation of the Agreement on the Iranian nuclear programme in May 2018, and the subsequent trade sanctions aimed at companies that had relations with Tehran. Such sanctions would surely also affect European companies that did business in Iran, which had to suffer the consequences of political decisions taken in Washington. This was clear proof that the limits imposed by third parties on Europe's autonomy of action could also involve national economic interests. This consequence led several MS – Germany foremost – to argue for the need for a broader vision of the political areas in which to seek greater autonomy.

2.4 Towards a “comprehensive approach”

Thanks in part to the activism of study centres and think-tanks, the terms strategic autonomy/sovereignty are starting to appear more and more in the texts of EU papers, articles and institutional documents, as is evident, for example, from the New Strategic Agenda 2019-2024, issued by the European Council in June 2019 [20]. Another factor that contributed to accelerating this process in 2020 was the Covid-19 crisis, which highlighted many of the limitations of the EU and its MS in their responses to the pandemic [21]. From the lack of medical devices and equipment to the interdependencies of the long value chains that limit production processes, Europe found that it was less autonomous than it thought. Awareness of these issues on the part of the EU institutions – first and foremost the new “geopolitical” Commission led by Ursula von der Leyen – did not take long to materialise [22]. Even the European Council – through its President Charles Michel – recognised that “it is of utmost importance to increase the strategic autonomy of the Union and produce essential goods in Europe. [23]” In terms of foreign and security policy, reflections on strategic autonomy continued to affect the work of the Foreign Affairs Council which, in December 2020, invited the MS Ministers “to identify concrete political initiatives and projects that can help strengthen the EU's ability to act and have a global impact. [24]” “Finally, the issues around strategic autonomy have not left the European Parliament indifferent, which has shown itself ready to support the vision of a more autonomous Europe in fields such as defence (a classic) or (more recently) the digital sphere [25]. Thus, the EU now seems to be heading towards adopting a “comprehensive approach” in the definition and search for its own strategic autonomy [26].

Revisiting the long debate on strategic autonomy is useful for creating some conceptual clarity and establishing the scope of the subject. In summary:

- historically, the concept had its genesis and was developed in the field of European defence, in both operational and industrial terms;



- over time, the idea of strategic autonomy also took on a political dimension and value, linked to European decision-making processes;
- eventually leading to the conceptually broader concept of “European sovereignty”;
- the new dynamics in the international system, coupled with recent events, have widened the political spheres involved in the search for greater autonomy/strategic sovereignty. Nowadays, it tends to be mentioned in areas such as the economy, digital technology, the climate, healthcare and energy.

Despite the myriad contributions, the concept of strategic autonomy continues to have some grey areas and differing interpretations [27]. Moreover, the partial superimposition of similar terminology – that of strategic sovereignty – has further hindered the clarity of a debate based on semantic presuppositions that do not always coincide.

3. The Boundaries and Relations of the Concept

What are we talking about when we talk about strategic autonomy? The word autonomy, in its etymology of Greek origin, describes the ability (or power) to decide for oneself the laws to follow. It is a term that goes back to another fundamental concept of politics, that of freedom, in its dual meaning of negative freedom and positive freedom. The former refers to “freedom from”, i.e. the absence of constraints imposed by third parties. The latter refers to the “freedom to”, which describes the concrete possibility of carrying out actions. In political philosophy, autonomy is usually associated with the concept of positive freedom. In fact, the possibility of making one’s own laws reflects a “freedom to”, which however assumes, for its full affirmation, an absence of laws imposed by third parties to be subject to, that is, a negative freedom. Thus, both definitions of freedom are linked by a logical order: there can be no positive freedom without negative freedom, where the opposite is possible.

Over the years, the development of the concept of strategic autonomy in the field of defence has been at the heart of Europe’s efforts to find its strategic freedom, both negative (De Gaulle’s attempt to escape the political decisions of American-led NATO), as well as positive (efforts to provide itself with its own military capabilities to be able to act alone). The EU therefore faced a double challenge: that of freeing itself from external decisions, and that of providing itself with the means to pursue its internal decisions. However, following the logic illustrated thus far, it would make no sense for the EU to avail itself of the aforementioned means if at the same time the internal decisions were not autonomous (we could hardly describe that as freedom). And that is not all. Creating the capacity to take action would be redundant if the EU were not in a position to make decisions. In this case, the problem is not so much about freedom, but the very nature of the political entity in question – the European Union – and the power with which it is endowed. This decision-making power takes on the value of a further prerequisite for the development of an autonomy understood as “freedom to act”.

3.1 The Three Theoretical Conditions

These theoretical assumptions concerning the concepts of freedom and power, frame the three conditions required for a full affirmation of autonomy: i) the ability to make decisions; ii) independence from the decisions of others; iii) the ability to put one’s own decisions into practice. The absence of even one of these requirements renders the state of autonomy imperfect. This is so because in that case there would only be partial autonomy, which could not be fully “strategic” in



the sense of ensuring a general conduct of decisive importance for the protection of one's interests or the achievement of one's objectives.

A definition of strategic autonomy that respects all three conditions is that proposed by Grevi: “strategic autonomy is about setting objectives, making decisions and mobilising resources in ways that do not primarily depend on the decisions and assets of others” [28]. It is important to point out that the concept of strategic autonomy does not necessarily involve a condition of self-sufficiency, both because such self-sufficiency may not respect all three conditions and because autonomy can provide for recourse (non-primary) to external resources.

The history of the search for European strategic autonomy shows how agendas and political initiatives have tended to favour the pursuit of the three conditions in separate and often alternative ways. In the field of defence, for example, political activism has focused on the acquisition of the essential capacity to implement one's own decisions, without first addressing the efficiency of decision-making procedures or political convergence (i.e. the ability to make decisions). In the economic sphere, however, the earnest desire to be emancipated from the decisions of others has not always found the means to make it a reality [29].

It is obvious that the construction of each of the conditions implies different levels of political sensitivity. The instruments involved in achieving these aims are often of a technical nature and are therefore easier to implement according to the functionalist modalities typical of the European integration process. Independence from external decisions, on the other hand, is an aspect that involves a greater degree of politicisation, which is affected by the bilateral relations of the MS with third countries. In summary, decision-making power is a very sensitive political dimension, one which touches on issues of national sovereignty, the reciprocal competences between the MS and the EU, decision-making procedures and political will. In essence, the strengthening of decision-making capacity risks presenting European governments with existential questions regarding the nature of the EU. To be clear: if the Council adopted CFSP decisions by a majority, could the EU still consider itself a simple international organization in the field of foreign policy?

3.2 Autonomy or Sovereignty

Internal EU issues related to the exercise of its decision-making power are at the heart of the debate on strategic autonomy. The problems are not exclusively with regard to the competences assigned to Brussels or the related decision-making procedures, but also involve the shortcomings and divergences between the 27 different political wills participating in the Union and the heterogeneity (by history and geography) of national strategic cultures and visions. In their attempt to overcome these critical issues, political decision-makers have sometimes preferred to place the common (technical) development of capacities before that of the political power that should govern them (see the case of Battlegroups [30]) or to evade the political rigidities of the European institutional framework, setting up new forums for cooperation (see Macron with EI2).

The attempt to combine the concept of sovereignty with that of autonomy must also be framed in this context. These two concepts have been used many times in alternative ways, while it is true that they are not completely similar. The affirmation of full sovereignty certainly implies compliance with all three conditions required to have autonomy. An entity is sovereign when it has legitimacy to decide, is independent of the wills of others and is able to effectively follow up



on its decisions. However, the concept of sovereignty implies the idea of a power that asserts itself or imposes itself at the expense of another. Historically, the term has therefore been imbued with an exclusionary dimension: where the sovereignty of one entity begins, that of another ends. On the other hand, and for other historical reasons, the concept of autonomy is less burdened by this interpretation, lending itself more readily to political visions that do not envisage a retreat of national sovereignties.

The proposal for a strengthening of European strategic sovereignty can actually be read as an attempt to establish a European sovereignty based on the retreat of national sovereignties, through the transfer of powers by the MS. Not surprisingly, this interpretation has been adopted by those EU countries most reluctant to question the prerogatives deriving from their national sovereignty [31]. That the concept of European sovereignty carries with it potential misunderstandings is indirectly recognised by its own promoters. The care with which Macron and Juncker underlined that European sovereignty is not at odds with national sovereignty shows their awareness of how easily the concept can lend itself to misunderstandings. In the vision of those who seek to avoid the dichotomy between the two sovereignties, there is a conviction that better coordination between the MS, combined with greater EU capacities, are the solution to better protect individual national sovereignties, which would otherwise be subject to the interference of increasingly competitive third states. This is a solution which, in theory, does not necessarily entail a transfer of sovereignty to Brussels, but which would protect “European” sovereignty as a whole [32].

To what extent a greater safeguarding of European sovereignty (national or shared) can be pursued without strengthening the decision-making capacity of the EU remains an open question. In some fields this operation seems quite simple, whereas in others it is more complex [33]. The fact remains that any discourse on greater European autonomy or sovereignty cannot avoid the questions regarding the Union’s decision-making capacities. The related problems and limits can be set aside by investing more in the other two conditions, but there is a theoretical limit that is difficult to avoid.

3.3 The Areas of Autonomy

In which political areas should the EU increase its strategic autonomy? Defence – in its operational and industrial dimensions – was where the concept was born. Nowadays, the debate has broadened to other fields: the economy [34], digital [35], energy [36], climate, health [37], space [38]. In each of these areas, strong global interdependence coupled with growing international competition have limited the room for action left to the EU and its MS. If greater autonomy is conducive to the pursuit of European interests, it cannot be overlooked that these interests are also (and above all) economic. The definition of Europe’s interests is a complex process, influenced by the specific weight of individual national interests and by the influence of the MS that comprise it. Therefore, it is not surprising that there are states such as France – which has always been eager to consolidate its external projection – keenly interested in developing autonomy in the field of security and defence, and others such as Germany – the leading EU exporter – whose focus is more on increasing Community independence in the economic-financial sectors. National interests matter, and those of France and Germany have certainly contributed to directing the debate on strategic autonomy.



The analysis of one political sphere compared to another alters the significance of the conditions required for the achievement of full autonomy. This means that in some fields the search for greater autonomy will suffer more from the EU's (in)capacity to make decisions, whereas in others it will be heavily dependent on the decisions of others or lack the means necessary to follow up on its own decisions. For example, in the field of foreign policy, the unanimity required by the CFSP/CSDP decision-making procedures has certainly reduced EU activism [39]. As regards economic-commercial relations, the American sanctions on Iran and the failure of INSTEX have highlighted the extent to which external influence can curb European autonomy [40]. In addition, the absence of technological infrastructure and “European champions” has often reduced the EU's attempts to become more independent in digital spaces, leaving them as mere ambitions. In the majority of cases, it is a simultaneous absence or lack of several conditions that limits full autonomy.

There was no lack of proposals to improve the strategic autonomy of the EU and its MS in the various sectors – both from a thematic and geographical perspective [41]. The Covid-19 pandemic has also required that greater attention be paid to the issue, extending its scope of analysis and application. After this phase of reflection, the onus is now on political decision-makers, who have to transform the proposals into initiatives, evaluating their desirability and feasibility.

Without being able here to go into the merits of each field and its proposals, it is interesting to highlight the main political alternatives that have emerged from the search for autonomy. These are issues that are mostly transversal to the various areas, the management of which goes hand in hand with the pursuit of the three conditions specified above.

4. The Five Political Dilemmas

Every time the process of European integration has been directed towards the pursuit of greater strategic autonomy, it has been faced with various alternatives. These alternatives describe different political options, sometimes so exclusionary (in fact or in the narrative) as to become trade-offs or real dilemmas. These are alternatives that can hide political divisions at the European level but which, regardless of their nature, are found in almost all political discussions on the strengthening of the European capacity for action. These alternatives are very relevant at this time, and must be kept in mind whenever the search for autonomy requires political compromises. In other words: almost always.

4.1 Atlanticism or Europeanism?

We have seen that the concept of strategic autonomy is linked to the field of defence. For De Gaulle, greater autonomy meant greater military (and political) independence from the United States. Today, many interpret a growing European military capability as not necessarily being out of step with Washington. On the contrary, they rather consider it an important step to consolidating transatlantic cooperation by increasing the involvement of Europeans. This notwithstanding, the idea is still widespread that the construction of a strategic autonomy by the EU could lead to a reduction of US commitment to the defence of Europe. This disengagement would not be realistically replaced by a strengthening of European capacity.

Political closeness to the United States and NATO is cultivated differently among the MS. In the area of defence, the Atlanticist vision espoused by some European capitals has frequently clashed



with more pro-European perspectives aimed at strengthening military capabilities within the EU framework. Regardless of the possible political syntheses and the many reassurances that come from the European institutions and the MS, the contrast between Atlanticism and Europeanism is a source of intra-EU divergences, which has also aroused criticism in the USA [42]. The recent “AUKUS” situation is an example of how these divergences can fuel tensions within the Euro-Atlantic community.

The contrast between the two visions also extends into other areas of activity. In trade, in finance, in the digital sphere, strengthening European autonomy may lead to a clash of interests on either side of the Atlantic. Such developments can be tempered by political dialogue and the deep transatlantic sharing of values and interests, but they cannot be ignored. Any realistic political initiative by the EU aimed at greater autonomy must be based on a fine balance between Atlanticist and Europeanist interests [43].

4.2 Technical or Political Autonomy?

What is the best way of achieving autonomy? The question echoes a classic quandary on how to advance the process of European integration. This process has, over the course of its history, availed itself of cooperation that was more technical than political, but with significant implications for the transfer of skills from the MS to Brussels.

This is the essence of the functionalist method, as opposed to the federalist one, based on a clear assignment of political powers between the federal centre and the federated states. The necessary conditions for autonomy include both the power to make decisions and the capacity to implement them. The tendency of the EU and its MS to seek advances through the functionalist method has also been applied in its search for autonomy, constructed more on increasing capacities than on the efficiency of decision-making procedures. To what extent can investment in capacity make up for political shortcomings? The answers to this question might vary depending on the political sphere in question. However, it should be remembered that without a minimal capacity to make decisions, an entity cannot be considered autonomous.

To begin with, technical cooperation has proven to be useful in fostering the creation of political will. And even in areas of autonomy, technical cooperation will be able to give rise to spill-overs capable of indirectly supporting the decision-making activism of the EU. In addition, the risk that questions concerning the exercise of decision-making power will be postponed indefinitely can lead to incomplete or inefficient results. This is an eventuality that has already occurred in the aforementioned cases in the defence sector and which could happen again if the attempts of greater autonomy in the field of public health or digital, for example, were to be implemented by an EU without the necessary capacities.

4.3 Ambition or Inclusion?

The processes of differentiated integration have facilitated the launch of political initiatives without having the support of all the MS. This has made it possible to increase the level of ambition of the European project, safeguarding the cohesion of the EU as a whole. Recently, differentiated integration has been the subject of numerous studies that have highlighted the opportunities and risks involved [44].



The development of strategic autonomy has also made use of differentiated integration. One example of this is PESCO. In the case of PESCO, the attempt to include the largest number of MS in enhanced cooperation has run counter to the level of ambition expected by some governments. Stakeholders found they were faced with an evident trade-off, in which the aspiration to a higher level of autonomy entails a lower participation of the States and vice versa. This is a dilemma that – in the case of PESCO – has led France to launch a parallel initiative, EI2, outside the EU framework, thus adding to the political confusion.

The construction of European autonomy is intended to be useful to the common interests of all MS, but due to its teleological implications regarding the project of greater integration, it can give rise to resistance and scepticism. Understanding to what extent it is advisable to proceed with a differentiated approach, aiming at a realistic level of ambitions while simultaneously safeguarding cohesion among the 27, is one of the challenges facing decision makers.

4.4 Opening Up or Shutting Down?

Are the elements of strategic autonomy always compatible with the principles and guidelines that the EU has set itself in foreign policy? In 2020, the Commission coined the term “open strategic autonomy” [45]. The idea is to promote a functional approach to European independence in the economic-commercial field, but one which is at the same time respectful of support for multilateralism, environmental sustainability, and social equality. Principles underlying the EU’s external actions.

The pandemic has revealed the limitations of the long value chains created by globalisation. At times of crisis, the procurement of basic necessities becomes a strategic concern. Thus, dependence on production that is located in third countries is a factor that limits autonomy. Without going so far as to indulge in illusions of self-sufficiency, the diversification of supply sources and the contraction of value chains (imagining them on a regional rather than global basis) can become solutions capable of increasing European independence. However, these could also become solutions that reduce international free trade by providing for the use of protectionist tools or regional preferences. Domestically, the need to have larger scale production and companies could also have consequences for competition in the common market. Not surprisingly, the creation of champions of business often brings with it the emergence of monopolies.

In a world where the liberal international order is retreating in line with multilateralism, EU action can only be dedicated to supporting the opening of international relations on a cooperative basis. This objective can be reconciled with the EU’s search for greater autonomy and protection of its interests, avoiding the “traps” that could reduce its power of political influence, based on explicit principles and values [46].

4.5 Aspirations or Realism?

To what extent can the achievement of European autonomy be considered realistic? The evaluation of the feasibility of an objective – however desirable it may be considered – is an essential aspect of any aspiration and subsequent political action. Pursuing an impossible objective risks being detrimental to the credibility of the EU. The above is true both internally, where unrealistic objectives that are destined to fail can rob the European project of legitimacy, with negative



consequences on the political will and commitment of the MS, and externally, presenting an EU that is unable to follow up on its declarations of intent.

For the EU, this would lead to a loss of credibility in the construction of its international legitimacy, which is counterproductive in many ways. The EU would find itself faced with the classic “capability-expectations gap” described by Hill, according to which the expectations regarding the EU’s international projection have often been elaborated based on “capacities” (political and material) that are not actually up to par [47].

On the other hand, excessive realism risks anaesthetising ambition at a historical moment when innovative and forward-looking policies are required of the EU to ensure the security and prosperity of its citizens in a post-pandemic world. A lack of ambition can also give rise to policies that are inadequate to achieve the strategic objectives that are set. Not to mention the possible effect on public opinion of having policies that are unsuitable for responding to the needs of society.

This last dilemma is burdened by the weight of all the previous ones: the more complicated it is to find a compromise between the previous positions, the more difficult it will be for the search for autonomy to come to fruition. Added to this are the shortcomings involved of the three necessary conditions. The more conditions are found to be absent or deficient, the more torturous the path towards full autonomy will be. An in-depth evaluation of all these aspects is required of the EU and its MS to understand where to set the bar for their ambitions. Such an evaluation must be made for each area and initiative, pragmatically and taking into consideration the different time horizons (there may be different objectives involved: short, medium and long term). Ensuring the sustainability of the objectives set is the first step in preventing the issue of strategic autonomy from quickly going out of fashion.

5. Conclusions: The Challenges Facing Europe

European strategic autonomy is a multifaceted concept, with many implications depending on its political implementation. It means creating a European structure that is capable of responding to cyber-attacks. It means having the tools to control foreign investments to avoid interference and threats to national security. It means designing financial mechanisms capable of avoiding the effects of secondary sanctions imposed by third parties. It means differentiating both the providers and the sources of Europe’s energy supply. It means developing regional value chains that ensure the production of essential goods. It means establishing a “European Security Council” [48], capable of making faster and more efficient decisions regarding the EU’s foreign and security policy. Autonomy can mean all of this and much more besides.

The affirmation of autonomy requires that some specific conditions be met, as well as the resolution of some recurring political alternatives, which tend to present themselves in the form of trade-offs or dilemmas. The former must be borne in mind any time an area is chosen in which to seek autonomy and the relative level of ambition. The latter must be considered when defining viable objectives and initiatives.

Beyond these aspects, the structural challenges that the issue has posed for European governments and institutions are twofold. The first concerns underlying existential questions. Asking yourself



how independent you want to be is a different way of asking yourself who you want to be and what you want to do. These are not easy questions to ask in an EU in which national views on the nature of the European project abound.

“Strategic autonomy is not just a foreign policy issue but also a critical requirement for fostering European integration” [49]. In view of this, the Conference on the Future of Europe can become an opportunity to address the challenge, starting with a review of EU competences and up to the planned decision-making procedures. Limiting the scope of the Conference to the policies, without taking in the politics, would limit the potential for innovation of the entire exercise. Discussing developments in European governance is an inevitable step if one is to engage in the search for strategic autonomy.

The second challenge concerns the analysis of the reality that is (and will remain) the background to European ambitions. How will the international order be configured over the next 5-10 years? What will be the orientations and dynamics put in place by the leading powers? The answers to these questions will guide the strategic visions and subsequent political decisions.



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