Autonomy and Strategy: What Should Europe Want?

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Europe wants autonomy and it wants a strategy. Semantically, of course, "wants" has a double meaning. First, it means "lacks". Europe lacks autonomy and it lacks a strategy. The second meaning of wants is "desires". Here, we have a genuine question. How many EU member states genuinely desire autonomy for the EU? How many are genuinely in favor of a grand strategy – as opposed to the EU's default practice of just muddling through? And there is also a third meaning behind wants: "needs". In my view, the EU needs strategic autonomy. But having said that, all I have done is set a point of arrival. How to get there?

Robustness in security and defense is not really in the EU's DNA. However, strategy and autonomy are demanding concepts. And strategic autonomy is a very challenging ambition. There are three main sets of discussions: What is it for? What does it require? And what does it mean? What is it for is a question about operations and capabilities. What does it require is a question about procurement and equipment. But what does it mean is a question about politics and strategy itself. All three sets of issues are crucial and any credible and viable strategic autonomy must ideally combine them.

Part of the confusion about strategic autonomy derives from the different emphases placed on these different elements (politics, equipment and operations) at different moments. After Saint-Malo's first foray into autonomy in 1998, controversy arose essentially around the operational challenge of autonomy. What type of crisis management missions was the EU capable of undertaking without major US assistance? More recently, US objections to strategic autonomy, particularly following the launch of PESCO and the European Defense Fund, have focused on the procurement dimension. American officials are whipping up concern about the potential exclusion of US companies from future EU defense equipment funding. This is a hard-nosed issue which involves at best disingenuousness on the US part, at worst a massive dose of hypocrisy. The operational dimension is also back on the agenda. Sven Biscop recently argued (in *Fighting for Europe*)[1] that the EU needs to aim for self-reliance in four main areas of security: domestic security; crisis response in the neighborhood; "connectivity" with the world in space, airspace, cyberspace and on the high seas; and, eventually, territorial defense. The latter needed to be said!

CLARITY ON THE STRATEGIC *FINALITÉ*

Some analysts argue that discussions over the political/strategic dimension of strategic autonomy should be avoided as being either premature or divisive – or both. Step-by-step,

piecemeal progress, it is argued, is a more fruitful course than the elaboration of grand strategic objectives. I would argue, on the contrary, that without agreement on the long-term political and strategic *finalité* of strategic autonomy (however contentious those discussions might be) there is little point in arguing about the nuts and bolts.

Grand strategy has been defined as "the calculated relationship between means and large ends". In that equation, the "large ends" are primary. To quote Seneca: "There is no favorable wind for the sailor who does not know where he is headed". Many European leaders have begun to argue that the EU must "take its fate into its own hands". But they don't say what precisely they have in mind. The debate on the European Army is heating up. The "European Army" is a notion that confuses and irritates more than it clarifies and reassures[2]. We need much greater lucidity about what exactly is meant by that notion. The question has to be: what exactly is it reasonable to expect the EU – autonomously – to be able to achieve in the Southern and particularly the Eastern neighborhoods?

In tackling the political/strategic dimension of strategic autonomy, semantics are very important. Some of the negative reaction, particularly in the US, has been to the word "autonomy" itself, especially when coupled with the word "strategic". In their recent report on *NATO at Seventy - An Alliance in Crisis*[3], Nicholas Burns and Douglas Lute have suggested that a preferable concept for the EU might be "strategic responsibility". Federica Mogherini, at this year's Munich Security Conference, coined the expression "cooperative autonomy". As the EU's chief diplomat, she was expressing sensitivity to US objections to the imponderables of strategic autonomy. In the EUGS document, while the concept of

autonomy appears no fewer than eight times, it is occasionally relativized by referring to "an *appropriate* level of ambition and strategic autonomy" (author's emphasis). But isn't this, as the French would say, simply to *noyer* le *poisson*?

Experts have been dancing like angels on pinheads around this issue of relativity. Sven Biscop distinguishes between "strengthening autonomy" (in domestic security), a "significant degree of autonomy" (Europe's 'connectivity') and "full strategic autonomy" (in crisis response). Daniel Fiott, in *Strategic Autonomy - Towards European Sovereignty in Defence?*[4], has usefully differentiated between "autonomy as responsibility", "autonomy as hedging" and "autonomy as emancipation". But, as he recognizes, "autonomy as responsibility" does not necessarily imply any real degree of European autonomy; and "hedging", in addition to offering an insurance policy, is largely a way-station on the road to emancipation. Nathalie Tocci recently wrote, in *Navigating Complexity: The EU's Rationale in the 21st Century*[5], that strategic autonomy means "the ability to act, preferably with others, beginning with NATO and the US, but when necessary also alone". But what do we mean by "when necessary"; and what does "alone" really imply? If Russia were actually to invade Latvia, and Donald Trump were to apply his "Montenegro test" for Article 5, strategic autonomy would need to be seriously robust. We need to break out of semantic creativity and ambiguity and say clearly what we are talking about.

Some argue that "autonomy" implies "separation" or "divorce". But this is not attested by the Oxford English Dictionary, which defines "autonomy" as meaning: (1) the right or condition of self-government; (2) freedom of the will; (3) freedom from external control. I would argue that it is "freedom from

external control" that is the key concept. General de Gaulle, the only European leader to have actually pursued autonomy for France, distinguished between independence and non-dependence. He insisted that non-dependence was the really appropriate term and the key ambition. Independence is a status. Non-dependence is a relational situation. Strategic autonomy means not being dependent on a third party for one's objectives, one's policies, and one's actions.

I want to encourage people to adopt a rigorous semantic position. Autonomy, like pregnancy, is an absolute. You can't be "a bit" autonomous. By the same token, a strategy that is not autonomous is little more than an aspiration. There is little point saying to Washington: "Please, sir, we want to be autonomous, but don't worry, we won't become so autonomous that you would no longer be in charge".

If the Europeans collectively lack confidence in their ability to achieve strategic autonomy, if they are not fully committed to it, or if they interpret the task weakly or half-heartedly, then both the concept and the ambition should be dropped as counter-productive distractions. If, however, as increasing numbers of EU leaders insist, and as their main strategy document proposes, they want to make the attempt, then it behooves them to devise a clear political plan for progressing towards it.

THE EU AND NATO: NO ZERO-SUM

What are the arguments of those opposed to strategic autonomy? For what one might call "professional Atlanticists" (that's not a pejorative term, it's a job description), there is one over-riding consideration. To quote Jens Stoltenberg, strategic autonomy runs "the risk of weakening the transatlantic bond, the risk of duplicating what NATO is already doing, and the risk of discriminating against non-EU members of the NATO Alliance". These are

exactly the same arguments as those deployed by Madeleine Albright in her reaction to the Saint Malo Declaration twenty years ago. Albright's "3-Ds" (don'ts) were "no decoupling, no duplication and no discrimination". Strategic autonomy risks undermining NATO in a situation where, it is asserted, "the European Union cannot protect Europe by itself".

Very similar arguments were deployed in October 2017 by a number of leading German foreign-policy experts in the manifesto *In Spite of it All: America* [6]. "Without the United States" the authors insisted, "there will be no security for and in Germany for the foreseeable future. […] It would be an error of historical proportions to play out 'more Europe' against the trans-Atlantic alliance".

Strategic autonomy is also roundly rejected by the Central and Eastern European countries, which are increasingly concerned about the solidity of the US commitment to NATO's Article 5. The cloud of uncertainty hanging over these states in the era of Trump remains dark and threatening. In that climate, all talk of strategic autonomy from within the EU is considered to be irresponsible: it "scares the hell out of us"[7].

John Bolton has insisted that if the Europeans ever "got to the point of achieving something concrete, that would be a dagger pointed at the heart of NATO". The bottom line in these arguments is that European security must depend – seemingly forever – on US leadership. Why? Because there is an underlying assumption that the rise of the EU must inevitably involve the demise of NATO. A zero-sum relationship.

But, without sounding Pollyannaish, we really must ask why does it have to be zero-sum? Never forget that when NATO was set up in the late 1940s, the fundamental objective was to offer a breathing space while the Europeans acquired the autonomous capacity to look after themselves. It was never intended to lead to

permanent European dependency on the US. As Eisenhower observed in 1951: "If in 10 years, all American troops stationed in Europe for national defense purposes have not been returned to the United States, then this whole project will have failed".

STRATEGIC AUTONOMY MEANS COLLECTIVE DEFENSE

I said at the outset that we need to think in seriously robust terms. Let's not beat about the bush. 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. All too few European exerts or analysts are prepared to go the whole hog and state unequivocally that the logical end-point of the autonomy process should be for Europe to be able to manage its own collective defense.

This does not imply separation from the US, rupture of the Atlantic Alliance, decoupling or divorce. An enduring partnership between the two sides of the Atlantic would undoubtedly reinforce that EU collective defense capacity, but the capacity itself (political, industrial and operational) must nevertheless be autonomous. Europe is as wealthy as the US, it has a much bigger population, it boasts technological, scientific, industrial and creative capacity as great as those of the US. It is (unlike the US) situated in a geographical area featuring numerous serious threats. In the name of what rationality should the EU elect to (want to) remain – in perpetuity – in a state of security dependency on the US? Why would the acquisition of serious military and defensive capacity by the EU be seen as undermining rather than strengthening the Alliance?

If Europeans and Americans truly believe that, despite their differences, they share overall values and are closer to one another than either is to any other global actor, then the evolving transatlantic relationship can and will rise above short-term problems of adaptation. If Europeans fear abandonment because of a clash of transatlantic values and/or interests, then to accept a state of permanent dependency makes absolutely no sense.

CONCLUSION: A MERGER BETWEEN CSDP AND NATO

There remains the not insignificant issue of the framework for engineering such autonomy and for generating the concomitant strategy. The vast majority of experts and analysts who write on this problem suggest (implicitly or explicitly) that the means will involve the intensification and empowerment of CSDP. This will be managed by the EU institutional architecture we are now all so familiar with: EEAS, PSC, EUMS, EUMC, EDA and other agencies of the EU's alphabet soup. It will be done outside of (albeit in cooperation with) NATO. It will be activated by the operational mechanisms of EU crisis management, particularly, many argue, PESCO. It will be assisted by the EDF and by growing Europeanization of equipment procurement.

CSDP has defined itself in opposition to its short-lived predecessor, the European Security and Defence Identity (ESDI), precisely because of the challenge of autonomy. ESDI – in the mid-1990s – was an arrangement whereby the EU could develop competence and capacity via NATO. But it was also overtly a formula predicated on US global leadership and European regional followership. Autonomy was taboo. That is why Saint-Malo, with its demand for autonomy, was seen as so revolutionary. But CSDP did not lead to meaningful autonomy. Whenever a genuine crisis arose on the EU's periphery (the Balkan wars, Libya, Ukraine/Crimea) the Union resorted to NATO.

And NATO is not going away (just look at the new HQ). Which is why, today, the EU and NATO are "cooperating" intensely – 74 joint projects. One might ask whether there are any issues on which they are not cooperating.

I believe that the road to genuine strategic autonomy lies through a merger between CSDP and NATO and to a gradual rebalancing of leadership and responsibility within an evolving alliance. This is still a minority approach, but it is one that is attracting growing numbers of advocates.

The entire cohort of American structural realists seems perfectly relaxed about letting Europe take over responsibility for its own neighborhood. They regard Russia as a declining power. Both Trump and Bernie Sanders (currently the two front runners for 2020) seem to imply something similar. Hubert Védrine hinted at it in his 2012 report on France's reintegration of the NATO integrated command. In that report, he coined the notion of the "Europeanization of NATO". Sten Rynning, has speculated on the prospects for a "Europeanized NATO" as an accidental consequence of Trump's assault on the international order. Daniela Schwarzer has called for the Europeans to play an increasing prominent role inside NATO. The notion of European leadership within the Alliance is implicit in Barack Obama's concept of US "leadership from behind". Steven Metz, from the US Strategic Studies Institute, recently posited a version of the same idea when he suggested that NATO should "consider an arrangement in which the United States is the 'supporting' rather than the 'supported' nation, with the position of Supreme Allied Commander finally shifting to a European

general. America could be Europe's backstop rather than its primary defender. Might Americans even ultimately consider a NATO in which the United States is formally affiliated but not a full member?[8]"

I would suggest that this, ultimately, is the way we will have to go. It should, at the very least, emerge as an explicit objective – the clear destiny that Seneca insists we have to have if we are ever to reach it. If we state that that is our objective, then we can begin serious work on the route map, study the tides and the trade winds, prepare for a long voyage. It will require seriously creative thinking about two crucial issues: nuclear weapons and political leadership. It will take time, a lot of time. 2049 – the 100th anniversary of the Treaty of Washington seems like a reasonable anniversary occasion by which to achieve European strategic autonomy – a mere ninety years late by Eisenhower's metric. I will be 104 by then, but hopefully still capable of raising a glass of champagne.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Sven Biscop, *Fighting for Europe*, Egmont Paper, 22 March 2019. http://www.egmontinstitute.be/fighting-for-europe-european-strategic-autonomy-and-the-use-of-force/

[2] Frédéric Mauro & Olivier Jehin, *L'Armée Européenne en Débat*. Brussels, GRIP, 2019.

[3] Ambassador Douglas Lute, Ambassador Nicholas Burns, *NATO at Seventy An Alliance in Crisis*, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Report February 2019. https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/NATOatSeventy.pdf

[4] Daniel Fiott, *Strategic autonomy: towards 'European sovereignty' in defence?*, Brief Issue 12, 2018. https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%2012__Strategic%20Autonomy.pdf

[5] Nathalie Tocci, *Navigating Complexity: The EU's Rationale in the 21st Century*, in IAI Commentaries Issue: 19|06, January 2019. https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaicom1906.pdf

[6] German foreign-policy experts in the manifesto *In Spite of it All: America*, 11 October 2017, The New York Times https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/11/world/europe/germany-united-states-trump-manifesto.html.

[7] Charlemagne, *In Europe's McCainland*, in *The Economist*, 6 October 2018.

[8] Steven Metz, *It's Time to Re-Imagine the NATO Alliance*, in *World Politics Review*, 27 July 2018.