



**WHAT IS THE EU TRYING  
TO ACHIEVE WITH  
STRATEGIC AUTONOMY  
AND IS IT FEASIBLE?**

**RESEARCH PAPER**

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# What is the European Union trying to achieve with Strategic Autonomy and is it feasible?

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## Summary

- With tensions and risk of armed conflict growing day by day between Russia and the West, it's well time for the European Union to establish how it would defend its territory and citizens in an eventual armed conflict.
- At the core, strategic autonomy is a common security and defence policy to ensure the security of European citizens and contribute to the stability of the European neighbourhood and the world in general. The EU wants to achieve this through little reliance on its, mostly trans-Atlantic, partners. However, what started as a concept focused on military autonomy has been broadened to encompass autonomy within the technological, health, cyberspace, and raw material spheres.
- Ultimately, the project is feasible but will be difficult. There has been a successful start to European cooperation in the military, cyber, and raw material sector through different projects. Overall, the EU's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic is also a good example of the Member States working together against a threat. However, EU Member States will struggle firstly, by having to tackle the issue of six EU Member States identifying as neutral or non-aligned. Secondly, Member States have different opinions on what constitutes a threat and what the collective response should be.

## Introduction

As the European Union slowly emerges from the Covid-19 pandemic and its vast socio-economic consequences, the Union can turn its attention back to the topics that had previously been set aside. One of these issues is the EU's ambitions for strategic autonomy. If the last few weeks are anything to go by with the dangerous return to 2014-esc tensions setting Russia against most of the Western world, it's well time for the European Union to establish how it would defend itself against armed conflict or war.

If the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic is a preview of how the handling of strategic autonomy might look, it seems it is possible for the EU to achieve common aims. For example, in its efforts to negotiate and obtain vaccine doses for all European citizens, by July 2021 the Union had impressively delivered "enough coronavirus vaccine doses to member states to reach a target to fully vaccinate at least 70% of adults in the bloc" (Reuters, 2021). However, any common response won't come without being slow, and internally difficult.

## What is Strategic Autonomy?

Coming up with the definition for strategic autonomy has been difficult for EU policy makers with often a vague broad stroke understanding. The November 2016 Council conclusions define it as the "capacity to act autonomously when and where necessary and with partners wherever possible" (European Council, 2017). In essence, it is the EU's aim to develop its manufacturing capacities and be autonomous in different sectors, initially militarily but now expanded to encompass technological, health, and cyber autonomy. The aim is to protect the EU and its citizens with less reliance on other partners in the world.

Strategic autonomy is a concept that relates back to the European Union's consideration for defence. The term was first used officially in the conclusions of the European Council in 2013, although this was not the first time the EU had reflected on its military defence. Evidently, the origins of the European Union, based on the European Coal and Steel Community (1952) and the European Economic Community (1957), are centred around economic ambitions. However, this European cooperation has led to the consideration of further integration to encompass an overarching European "security and defence alliance" (Cramer & Franke, 2021). As pointed out by Cramer and Franke, "as early as the 1950s" certain Member States "discussed plans for a European army".

In recent years, this idea of strategic autonomy has been revived through the deep changes in the world order. The acceleration in the rise and expansion of authoritarian China and Russia beyond their borders since the 2000s coupled with the breakdown of the Trans-Atlantic relationship aggravated through the Trump presidency, has led the EU to question the necessity of building its capabilities to defend itself in any future conflict. Josep Borrell described Trump as having "awaken [the European Union] from certain strategic sleepwalking" (Cañas, 2020) as, since World War II, "Europeans got used to living under the protective umbrella of the United States". The fear of a conflict has grown again in January 2022 with Russia threatening to invade Ukraine over Putin's opposition to Ukraine's interest in joining NATO.

The goal of strategic autonomy is primarily a "common security and defence policy (CSDP)" to ensure the "security of European citizens" and contribute to the "stability of the European neighbourhood and the world in general" (European Council, 2013). It's increasingly seen that while the United States has been involved in providing protection for Europe, whether directly or indirectly, this involvement is fading. Gotkowska (2020) explains that "the

US will no longer be engaged in large-scale military operations in Africa and the Middle East and will leave to Europe crises and conflict resolution in the European neighbourhood.” The EU is also increasingly not being invited to the table to resolve conflicts in its neighbourhood with the “Astanisation of regional conflicts” (Borrell, 2020) for example concerning Syria, referring to the exclusion of Europe from talks about the conflict between Russia and Turkey in Astana, Kazakhstan. In sum, in this growing sense of unease, the EU has been left feeling vulnerable and would like to be less dependent on the United States in the future to assure the safety of its citizens.

Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic has shown the extent of the vulnerability and dependence of Europe on other regions of the world and the necessity for autonomy. As Josep Borrell (2020) has laid out, “science, technology, trade, data, and investments are becoming sources and instruments of force in international politics.”

In addition, evidently the EU’s ambition for strategic autonomy is also a bid to avoid being swept away in the evolving world order by reinforcing the EU’s presence and strength in different strategic areas like the military or technological arena. As explained by Josep Borrell (2020), “the weight of Europe is shrinking”. At the start of the 1990s, Europe represented “a quarter of the world’s wealth”, but this may be slashed down to only about 11% in the next 20 years, half of China’s expected 22%. With these projections, Europe needs to take immediate action if the bloc does not want to become “irrelevant” in terms of military capabilities, technology, health, and the cyberspace.

### **How close is the EU to achieving strategic autonomy?**

There has been a successful start to European cooperation in the military, cyber and raw material sectors. To achieve military strategic autonomy,

there are three pillars. These are increasing the efficiency, visibility, and impact of the CSDP, increasing the development of capacities and reinforcing the European defence industry through durable and competitive innovation. In 2017, the European Defence Fund (EDF) was created and followed by the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) the following year. The EDF allows for “collective military procurement and investment on projects” while PESCO “promotes military research and development” (Erlanger, 2020). Overall, these two initiatives have “increased cooperation on defence projects and fostered a sense of military solidarity across the EU” (Cramer & Franke, 2021). For example, French forces have been supporting Estonian troops in the Baltic Sea and along the Estonian border with Russia (Borrell, 2020). In parallel, Estonian forces also operate alongside French forces in Mali in operations against terrorism in the Sahel. Beyond defence, there have also been cyber breakthroughs as forefront Nordic and Baltic Member States have been supported by “all other European states and the EU” (Borrell, 2020) in defending against cyber threats.

In cooperating on obtaining raw materials, the European Raw Materials Alliance (ERMA) was launched in 2020. This cooperation is crucial amid a critical global shortage of raw materials. Through this alliance, the EU will be able to develop its resource autonomy. A “partnership of companies, business associations and governments will secure access to 30 critical inputs by increasing domestic production” (Borrell, 2020) and increase their bargaining power when passing contracts with foreign suppliers. The stakes of achieving autonomy concerning raw materials is great as failing to secure these materials can have deep repercussions on the entire EU’s industry from the automotive, renewable energy, defence, and aerospace sectors.

Nevertheless, the EU is only at the start of a difficult endeavour to achieving strategic autonomy. Its likelihood of success is questionable. Just focusing

on its primary objective, military strategic autonomy, seems difficult. Firstly, it's a question of achieving a common military response and translating this unification into practice. Right from the start, the Union will run into an issue. Six of the EU's Member States – Austria, Ireland, Finland, Sweden, Cyprus, and Malta – “self-identify as neutral or non-aligned” states in any conflict. In 1993, Denmark voted through domestic referendum to opt out of European defence. As such, there may already be certain states hesitant or unwilling to participate in any centralised EU military efforts. Beyond the focus on military unity, any common EU response, with regards to, for example, a cyber threat or health threat, would require a previous common designation of a risk to Europe warranting unified action. As Josep Borrell points out, “even if EU member states generally agree that they face the same risk, the perception of those risks is necessarily differentiated.” Across the European Union, “the perceptions of threat and dangers is not the same” (Borrell, 2020). This would also mean agreeing to the financing of any response within the European budget. With the “pandemic having cratered the economy”, Member States will evidently have a “fierce battle of the budget” (Ibid.) with each state putting forward different priority areas.

The handling of the vaccine roll-out by the EU was a good test run to see how common action could play out. Member States successfully came together but it was a tiresome process. The Covid-19 vaccine roll-out in the EU has been organised through a collective European action on vaccine procurement on the basis of the 2014 Joint Procurement Agreement of medical countermeasures. This has been a method to avoid each Member State attempting to buy vaccines separately to instead have the European Union use its collective bargaining power to negotiate lower prices to buy the doses and then distribute them among the Member States. Successfully, the EU was able to negotiate and buy vaccines at “very competitive prices internationally”. The trade-off was the European Commission being

“accused by national leaders of being too bureaucratic, too limiting to its members, too slow.” In part this was due to Member States harbouring “different preferences for national suppliers and production, the type of vaccines prices, etc.” However, there was some flexibility as Member States were allowed to buy “a specified number of vaccine doses in a given time period and at given prices” for their domestic use and could choose to decline their “pro-rata share”.

The process also showed the risk of collective action potentially stopped or stalled by a single Member State. Any vaccine doses order required unanimous approval of all European Union states, but the process was threatened when France reportedly tried to block an order from the bloc for 1.8 billion doses of the BioNTech/Pfizer vaccine, planned for the next two years because French companies wanted to play a ‘bigger role in the production of vaccines’.

### **What would strategic autonomy mean for the European Union’s external partners?**

The EU understands strategic autonomy would impact its relationships with different external partners such as its Trans-Atlantic counterparts as well as rising powers, Russia and China. Even if the EU strongly defends that strategic autonomy would not be in replacement of close cooperation with its partners, it will evidently have an impact on these relationships.

The positive impact put forward is that the European Union can only be stronger in its relationship with others through strengthening itself. The Council’s 2013 conclusions lay out that within its aims for strategic autonomy, the “Union stays firmly determined to work in close cooperation with its international, transatlantic and regional partners” with a “spirit of mutual reinforcement and complementarity”. Josep Borrell (2020) explained that

“only a more capable, and thus more autonomous Europe, can meaningfully work with Joe Biden’s administration.” On this point, both the American and European side would be satisfied. As expressed by President Trump previously, there have been “complaints that the Europeans do not make sufficient efforts to defend themselves”, leaving Americans complaining about the United States’ continuous support to “countries that do not want to spend on their own defence” (Ibid.). European strategic autonomy would therefore reduce the EU’s dependence on the United States but also reduce the US’ expense on Europe. Nevertheless, in a case of ‘careful what you wish for’, the United States may come to regret a loss of influence over the Western world if the EU detaches from their support and influence.

Finally, in terms of the wider balance in the world order, a stronger and militarily capable European Union may lead to feelings of threat from other countries such as China and Russia. Left to see is if Xi Jinping and Putin believe a stronger Europe is an opportunity for a stronger relationship as equals or a dangerous threat to their pushed new world order.

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