# ARTICLE

## 3 QUESTIONS FOR MARIANNE DONY

| 22/11/23 | David Zygas

**professor Marianne Dony (Université Libre de Bruxelles): european strategic autonomy**

**What is European strategic autonomy?**

In a broad sense, European strategic autonomy refers to the ability of the Union to make choices based on its own interests and values, rather than on dependencies or impositions from external actors. It means less dependence and more influence.

Originally, the term was associated with defense. Historically, the first definition of European strategic autonomy was given in the Franco-British Saint-Malo declaration of December 4, 1998: "To fully play its role on the international stage, the Union must have autonomous action capabilities, supported by credible military force, the means to decide to use it, and the will to do so in order to act in international crises." The term 'autonomy' is not expressly mentioned in the Lisbon Treaty but is implicitly present throughout. It was about member states being able to assemble forces, initially envisaged as an army corps (60,000 men, later reduced to 1,500), to manage crises directly impacting them in the Union's vicinity when the United States does not wish to intervene, all within an intergovernmental framework. Three strong markers define it: crisis management, outside the Union's territory, without U.S. intervention. Initially, strategic autonomy was synonymous with the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), representing a limited form of military independence: managing international crises with an expeditionary force. This concept caused little internal debate as it allowed for a clear and universally acceptable articulation with NATO, which is centered on the territorial defense of its members in the event of armed attack, with the help of U.S. (and Canadian) forces.

In 2013, the notion expanded while remaining in the military domain. The Commission presented a communication titled: "Towards a More Competitive and Efficient Defense and Security Sector," which included the following sentences: "Europe must be able to assume its responsibilities for its own security and for international peace and stability in general. For this, it needs a certain degree of strategic autonomy: to be a reliable and credible partner, Europe must be able to decide and act without depending on the capacities of third parties." This idea was somewhat endorsed by the European Council, which in its conclusions of December 19 and 20, stated: "Europe must have a more integrated, sustainable, innovative, and competitive defense and technological industrial base to ensure the development and support of its defense capabilities, which will also enable it to increase its strategic autonomy and its ability to act with partners."

In 2016, the "Global Strategy of the European Union," presented by the High Representative, definitively enshrined the concept, while beginning to extend it beyond the military sector: it explicitly expressed the "ambition to endow the European Union with strategic autonomy. We need this to serve the common interests of our citizens and promote our principles and values. An appropriate level of ambition and strategic autonomy is important if Europe is to promote peace and security both inside and outside its borders. That is why we will intensify our efforts in defense, counter-terrorism, energy, strategic communications, and cyberspace." In response, the Council of the European Union stated in its implementation plan for the global strategy that: "The Council is determined to strengthen the Union's ability to act as a guarantor of security and to strengthen the Common Security and Defense Policy as a key element of the Union's external action. This will enhance its overall strategic role and its ability to act autonomously when necessary and with partners whenever possible." It is no longer just about projecting power outside the Union's borders but about ensuring the defense of its own security inside and outside its borders, particularly in terms of counter-terrorism and cyberspace, and more broadly to reinforce the Union's overall strategic role. The articulation with NATO becomes less precise when it is stated that the Union will act autonomously when necessary and with partners whenever possible. Finally, emphasis is placed on the industrial dimension of strategic autonomy.

This concept of strategic autonomy within the Union's borders was opposed by Central European states, led by Poland, as well as the Baltic and Nordic states. All these countries, rightly concerned about Russia's aggressive maneuvers, saw in this French-origin concept a desire to "decouple" European defense from NATO, fearing it would lead to the withdrawal of U.S. forces from European territory.

**What areas does strategic autonomy cover?**

With the health crisis, the scope of strategic autonomy has greatly expanded. Europeans have become aware that with the decline of the Union's economic weight in the world, it is heavily dependent on third countries for the supply of certain goods, raw materials, or essential services, and that any disruption of supply chains can lead to serious shortages and compromise economic growth and the well-being of European citizens. This is all the more true as the Union is, in many areas, dependent on major world powers, which may be potential rivals and towards which legitimate mistrust can be nourished. This is compounded by security threats exacerbated by the crisis: misinformation and propaganda, or the proliferation of cyber-attacks.

In this context, the European Union's strategic autonomy becomes "a process of political survival," to use a phrase from the High Representative. Strategic autonomy now aims for resilience, i.e., the Union's ability to withstand both civil and military shocks, and is linked to the political will to address the Union's vulnerabilities and dependencies in all strategic sectors: space, energy, health, digital, high technology, rare materials, etc.

Josep Borrell stated in December 2020: "The stakes of strategic autonomy are not limited to security and defense. They concern a wide range of sectors, such as trade, finance, and investment. While the European Union already enjoys strategic autonomy in trade, there is room for progress in finance and investment."

In turn, this extremely broad vision of strategic autonomy frightened the more liberal Europeans, fearing that the Union would move towards industrial and commercial autarky, or in other words, towards protectionism. This is why the curious concept of "open strategic autonomy" was born. At the European Council in October 2020, the Twenty-Seven agreed to state that, in the areas of the single market, industrial policy, and digital, "achieving strategic autonomy while preserving an open economy is a key objective of the Union." Its goal is to find a new balance between security and competitiveness that will ensure the Union's future ability to "act autonomously when and where necessary and to work with partners wherever possible." Thus, in May 2021, the Commissioner for Competition stressed that the Union must find a careful balance between, on the one hand, strengthening its own capacities in strategic areas, and on the other hand, ensuring that the Union strengthens its position in global value chains by diversifying external trade and cooperating with its international partners.

In September 2021, the Commission presented a "Strategic Foresight Report," titled "Strengthening the Long-Term Capacity and Freedom of Action of the European Union," in which it defined eight "essential areas of action in which the European Union can exploit circumstances allowing it to assert its global leadership and ensure its open strategic autonomy": sustainable and resilient health and food systems; supply of decarbonized and affordable energy; capacities in data management, artificial intelligence, and advanced technologies; supply of critical raw materials; standardization; resilient and future-proof economic and financial systems; skills and talents that match our ambitions; and finally, the only area specifically concerning defense, security and defense capabilities, and access to space.

**Is this a realistic perspective, and what is the timeframe?**

Last April, Emmanuel Macron, in a speech in The Hague on European sovereignty, argued that the ideological battle has been won, and the foundations are laid. It's time to accelerate implementation in the military, technological, energy, and financial sectors.

However, this is far from certain. Beyond a superficial consensus, Europeans have failed to agree on what greater strategic autonomy should look like, how to organize to achieve it, who would be the decision-makers in a crisis, and how to distribute costs. As a result, strategic autonomy is more a utopia than a realistic prospect. This is due to both internal and external reasons.

Strategic autonomy can be seen as a multiplication: political will x decision-making ability x capacity to act. If any of these factors is zero, then the product is also zero. And these internal difficulties are compounded by external obstacles.

Let's start with the EU's strategic autonomy in defense.

Political will continues to be lacking, due to strong divergences among member states about a European defense and the Union's autonomy. While countries like France strongly advocate for it, others are much more wary, particularly since France is driving this project, which may contribute to their reluctance. Another limitation is the belief, particularly among Central and Eastern European countries and Denmark, that NATO ensures the Union's security and should continue to do so. Other states lack the political will to contribute to a common defense and thus to the Union's strategic autonomy due to their tradition of neutrality (such as Austria, Ireland, and until recently, Sweden and Finland) or a complex relationship with military power, as Germany perfectly illustrated until recently.

Regarding decision-making means, the second component of strategic autonomy in defense, it's clear that they are severely hindered by the unanimity rule, especially in a field where divergences between member states are significant.

Lastly, the Union's military capacity depends on the military capabilities of its member states. There's no European capacity that allows the Union to quickly deploy and sustain forces capable of managing all crisis situations. And the member states' military capabilities are limited themselves.

Externally, the main limit to this autonomy lies both in NATO's protection and the United States' dominance in European defense, the two being interlinked. This was particularly evident after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The United States outpaced all EU member states combined in providing military aid to Ukraine, although many European countries and Union institutions make significant contributions and provide essential support to Ukraine. They have also agreed to replace many of the weapons systems these allies have supplied to Ukraine. In just a few months, American troop deployments in Europe have risen from a post-war low of about 65,000 to 100,000. Furthermore, after this invasion, the states of Northern and Eastern Europe significantly changed the internal dynamics of the Union. Poland, Sweden, the Czech Republic, and the Baltic states have demonstrated a kind of moral leadership in European foreign policy. They believe the events have shown their assessment of the Russian regime was correct and that Western EU states didn't listen to them as they should have. They also feel justified in their view that only the United States can ultimately guarantee their security.

This new internal European political dynamic is shaping European defense policy for the future. If there is a real increase in European defense spending, the structure of this spending means that it will actually create greater dependence on the United States. Faced with war, defense planning continues to be largely isolated, and many European countries see defense cooperation as a challenge, considering it only when it aligns with their national plans, often opting for national solutions or non-European suppliers.

Efforts to create a resilient, competitive, and innovative European defense technological and industrial base have taken a back seat. The focus is on quickly filling capability gaps, leading to the purchase of standard, mainly American, equipment. The result is that Europeans risk abandoning the development of a strong and competitive European defense industry, with expertise in future strategic technologies comparable to other major powers.

Consequently, a new concept has emerged: "strategic responsibility." The European Council in December 2022 emphasized that, given a more hostile environment and broader geopolitical trends, "the European Union needs to take greater responsibility for its own security and, in terms of defense, follow a strategic line of action and strengthen its capacity to act autonomously," while also emphasizing "the importance of the transatlantic link as reflected in both the EU's Strategic Compass and NATO's Strategic Concept." This notion of "strategic responsibility" seems more suitable than autonomy, considering both NATO's complementarity to the Union and the subsidiary nature of European capabilities compared to those of the United States, as highlighted by the war in Ukraine.

While autonomy suggests a form of independence and thus sources of disagreement, responsibility refers to the existence of decision-making powers and the accountability for those powers. It implies the Union taking charge of its own security but doesn't mean operating without cooperation with the United States.

Regarding economic strategic autonomy, the United States' adoption of new industrial policy measures such as the Inflation Reduction Act and the CHIPS and Science Act has caused much concern in Brussels and elsewhere about how Europeans can preserve their own strategic industries. Following these acts, the European Council concluded in December 2022 that it's important to preserve Europe's economic, industrial, and technological base, as well as fair competition conditions globally. It particularly highlighted the importance, in the current global context, of an ambitious European industrial policy to adapt the European economy to ecological and digital transitions and to reduce strategic dependencies, especially in the most sensitive areas, while ensuring fair competition conditions. The Council recalled the need for a coordinated response to strengthen Europe's economic resilience and global competitiveness, while preserving the integrity of the single market. However, it's far from certain that this debate will result in political measures affecting U.S. foreign economic policy. Most member states currently do not want a more independent policy. Almost unanimously, European policymakers privately acknowledge the risks of dependence on the United States and express their concerns about the return of Trump or his like to the U.S. presidency. But, especially during the war in Ukraine, they feel collectively incapable of greater autonomy and are unwilling to make political or fiscal sacrifices to achieve it. There's also a prevailing sentiment that their growing security dependence on the United States means they will mostly accept economic policies formulated within the American program.

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