

Strategic autonomy: towards ‘European sovereignty’ in defence?

by Daniel Fiott

Strategic autonomy. Two familiar words that are yet again in vogue in Europe but which cause confusion and, in some quarters, even alarm. The last time strategic autonomy stirred controversy was in 2003 during the run-up to the Iraq War, but perhaps the most well-known instance followed the Balkan crisis of the 1990s.¹ The Franco-British Saint-Malo Summit in 1998, which paved the way for the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and called for the EU to develop the capacity for autonomous military action, led the Clinton administration to warn the EU that its military autonomy should not cause any de-linking with NATO, nor duplicate existing efforts or discriminate against non-EU members.²

Today, debates about strategic autonomy in Europe have mainly resurfaced because of Washington’s insistence that European governments shoulder more responsibility for defence within NATO.³ The recent decision by the US to eventually renege on the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty has also fuelled European distrust towards the White House. Furthermore, US⁴ and NATO⁵ misgivings about new EU security and defence initiatives such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF) have added to the controversy.

However, current debates about strategic autonomy resonate beyond security and defence and

Summary

- > Debates about strategic autonomy are gaining traction in Europe and recent security and defence initiatives have helped outline a better understanding of what the EU means by the concept.
- > Strategic autonomy should not be seen as a binary choice which Europe either has or does not have. Autonomy should rather be seen as a spectrum reflecting favourable and unfavourable dependencies.
- > A more mature approach to burden sharing is needed where the EU can take up a more appropriate level of strategic autonomy in security and defence without being accused of challenging the transatlantic link when it does so.
- > The EU is not yet able to move towards a higher level of autonomy in security and defence, but the Union is displaying greater responsibility for its security and defence and it is hedging against strategic uncertainties.

calls for greater ‘European sovereignty’ apply to economic and foreign policy, too.⁶ The growing divergence between the EU and the US on a number of issues such as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPoA) on Iran and the Paris Climate Agreement has shown that the EU is willing to uphold multilateralism, without US support and/or leadership if necessary. Nevertheless, while strategic autonomy can also apply to trade, foreign policy, energy and more, the focus of this Brief is on security and defence. It delves into how the EU presently defines strategic autonomy in defence, but also offers an insight into how the Union’s understanding of autonomy could evolve in the future.

The objective of this Brief is to better comprehend how the EU conceives of strategic autonomy, rather than dwell on a broader focus on ‘Europe’ or ‘NATO Europe’. To this end, the Brief compares the range of defence initiatives that have been developed by the EU since 2016 against three different conceptual visions of strategic autonomy: autonomy as *responsibility*, autonomy as *hedging* and autonomy as *emancipation*. Each of these forms of autonomy have implications for transatlantic burden sharing and the EU’s level of ambition on security and defence.

Autonomy as responsibility

The first vision of strategic autonomy is that of responsibility. This vision links directly to the notion that European states should take up a greater share of the burden inside NATO and, when appropriate, through the EU. Washington contributes a great deal to the alliance, including \$685 million to NATO common funding, \$6.87 billion for NATO military capabilities, and \$4.78 billion for the European Deterrence Initiative. Moreover, approximately 70,000 active duty personnel are deployed as part of US European Command (USEUCOM).⁷ Advocates of autonomy as a form of greater responsibility recognise this contribution and value the importance of the transatlantic relationship. For example, while EU member states (minus Denmark) contributed just over 1,300 active duty personnel as part of CSDP military operations and missions in 2017, in the same year over 10,000 personnel from these same countries (including Denmark) were deployed with NATO. Indeed, while the US accounted for approximately 41% of the roughly 21,000 personnel deployed as part of NATO missions in 2017, the EU member states covered

43% of personnel and non-EU NATO members made up the remaining 16%. Despite these figures, however, in 2017 just over 52,000 personnel were deployed by EU member states to EU, NATO, OSCE, UN and other military missions and operations combined.⁸ In the same year, the US deployed over 208,000 personnel to various missions and operations around the world.⁹

Under this vision, autonomy is defined as the freedom *to* conduct missions and operations autonomously rather than the freedom *from* dependencies on the hegemon. To this end, a more responsible EU should be militarily capable of undertaking autonomous missions and operations in its neighbourhood and globally, if so required. By encouraging EU member states to enhance their financial and operational investments in defence, the hope is that the EU will be better positioned to undertake military missions and operations without needing to rely on the political and military support of NATO or the US. Citing historical examples from the Western Balkans in the 1990s and, more recently, in Libya in 2011,¹⁰ proponents of this vision of strategic autonomy recognise the challenges of being dependent on Washington for situations that geopolitically affect Europe more than they perhaps do the US. Here, it is worth noting that while the US has supported EU CSDP missions and operations in Mali, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia and the Horn of Africa, the 34 missions and operations deployed by the EU since 2003 have been largely autonomous in terms of decision-making processes, command and control structures and capabilities.

Of course, arguing that autonomy should be seen as a form of responsibility can be regarded as a symptom of European fears that the US is impatient with European governments. Whereas the US continues to dedicate capabilities and funding to European deterrence following Russia’s seizure of Crimea in 2014, conflicting messages by the current US president on defence spending and the nature of NATO’s Article 5 guarantee has stoked European fears. Accordingly, signalling to Washington that Europe is ready to take up greater responsibilities in NATO and through the EU is seen as a way of staving off any future American decoupling from Europe, and of ensuring the long-term endurance of the transatlantic alliance.¹¹ Honouring this spirit, the EU’s recently stated level of ambition in security and defence respects NATO’s specific mandate for deterrence,

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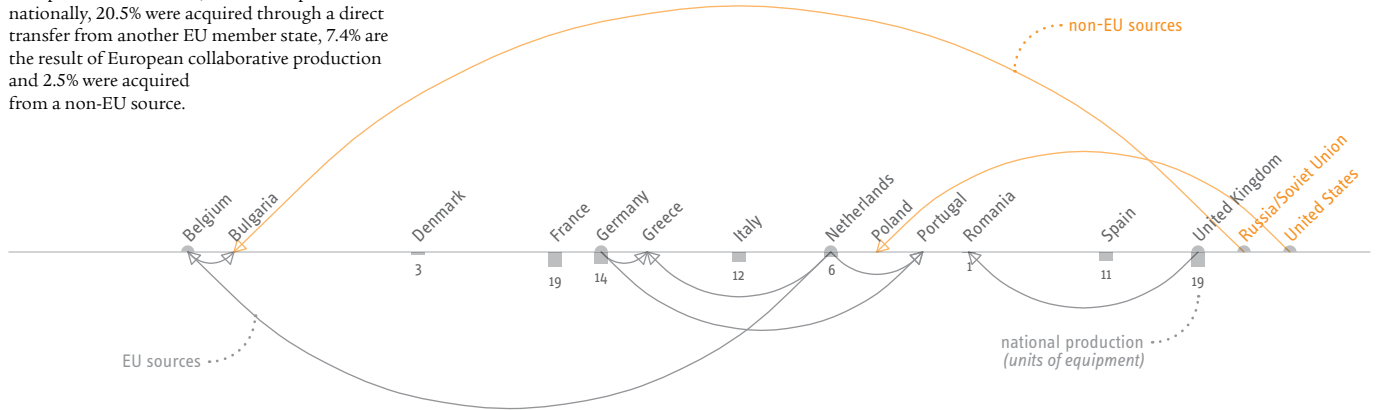


Figure 1 | Military capability dependencies

current inventories as of December 2017

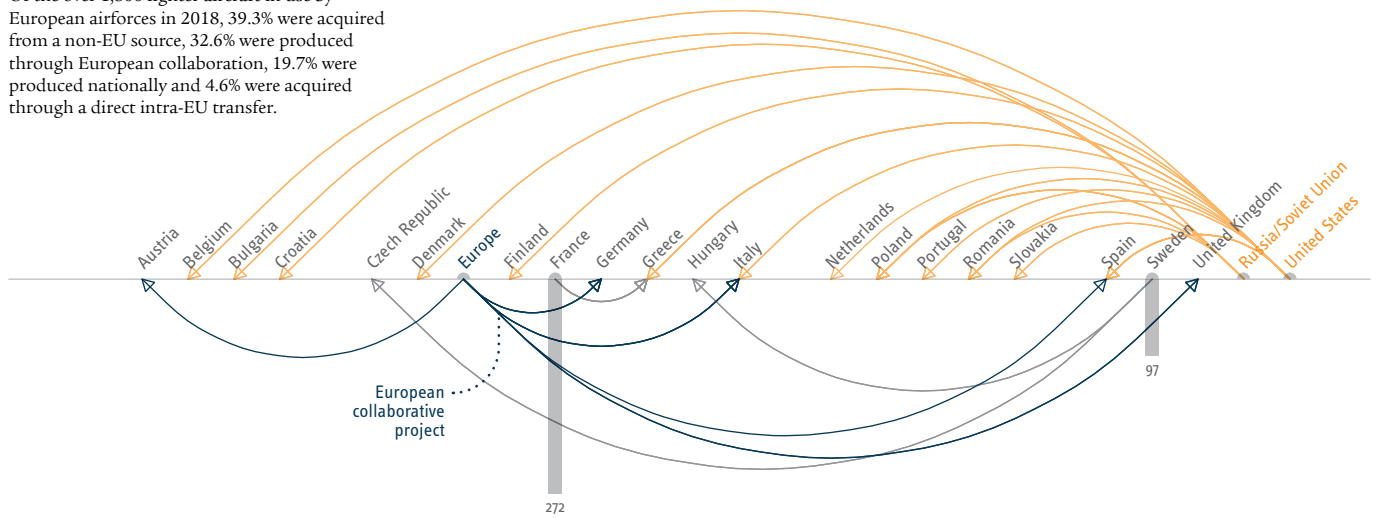
Frigates and destroyers

Of the over 120 principal surface vessels in use by European navies in 2018, 69.7% were produced nationally, 20.5% were acquired through a direct transfer from another EU member state, 7.4% are the result of European collaborative production and 2.5% were acquired from a non-EU source.



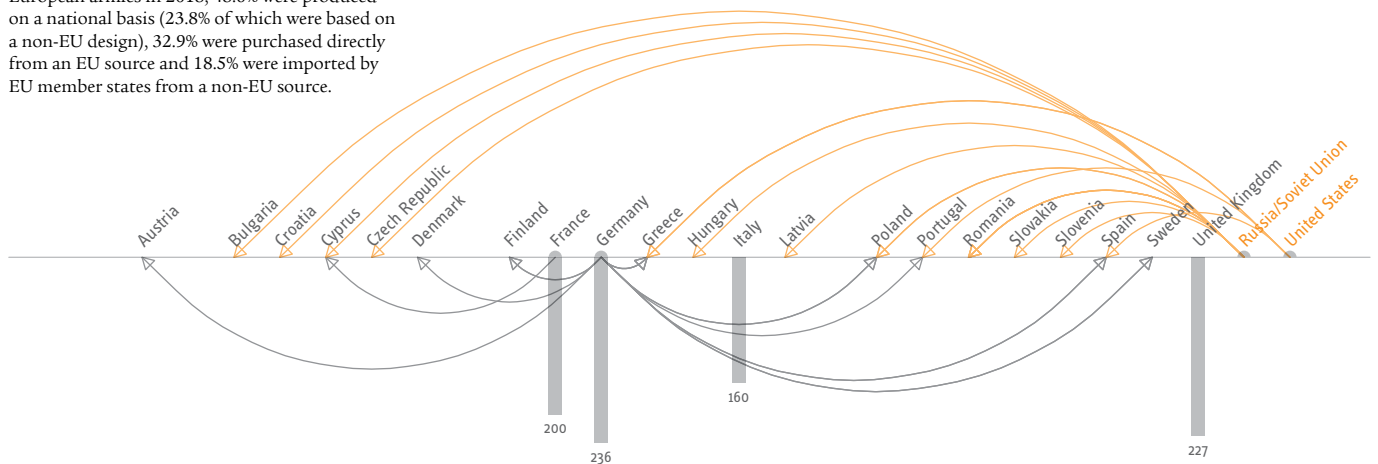
Fighter aircraft

Of the over 1,800 fighter aircraft in use by European airforces in 2018, 39.3% were acquired from a non-EU source, 32.6% were produced through European collaboration, 19.7% were produced nationally and 4.6% were acquired through a direct intra-EU transfer.



Main battle tanks

Of the over 4,700 main battle tanks in use by European armies in 2018, 48.6% were produced on a national basis (23.8% of which were based on a non-EU design), 32.9% were purchased directly from an EU source and 18.5% were imported by EU member states from a non-EU source.



Data: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2018

but it also highlights the Union's ambition to contribute to crisis management, as well as deal with external border management, hybrid threats, cyber security, counter-terrorism and protect the global commons (maritime and space).¹²

Nevertheless, there are a number of challenges associated with this vision of autonomy. Quite apart from the fact that some may take umbrage with the word responsibility because it could signal continued European subservience to the US, autonomy as a form of responsibility does not necessarily reflect a desire for defence-industrial autonomy. For those who advocate for more responsibility, operational and industrial autonomy do not have to be linked. Here, the performance of defence capabilities is more important than their origin. For some European governments, being able to 'buy American' defence equipment is a way of strengthening national defence, bolstering their bilateral relationship with Washington, increasing interoperability within NATO and gaining access to cutting-edge military technologies. For other European governments, however, the desire to maintain the transatlantic relationship in this way may come at the expense of Europe's defence-industrial competitiveness. The argument here is that strategic autonomy in defence cannot be achieved if non-EU actors, in this case the US, hold substantial political authority over the use of equipment and ultimate ownership of key strategic technologies.

While it is a fact that American defence contractors in Europe¹³ support the employment of some of the 1.4 million highly-skilled individuals directly and indirectly employed in Europe's defence sector,¹⁴ a more complete picture of industrial autonomy should include considerations of intellectual property rights, technology transfers, export control, supply chain vulnerabilities, increased potential for industrial espionage, political authorisation for weapon usage (see, for example, the case of Reaper drones)¹⁵, industrial skills accumulation and more. As Figure 1 shows, many European governments operate non-EU produced or licensed defence equipment and systems. For example, while only 2.5% of principal surface vessels operated by EU navies come from non-EU suppliers, this increases to 18.5% for main battle tanks (MBTs) operated in the EU and 39.3% for fighter aircraft.¹⁶

On closer inspection of the data, however, it is noticeable that it is not just a dependency on non-EU suppliers that is hindering European industrial autonomy in defence. Indeed, European

governments still define defence-industrial autonomy in largely national rather than European terms. For instance, 69.7% of all principal surface vessels in use today in the EU were produced nationally and only 7.4% were produced through European collaboration. In aerospace, collaboration is more the norm with 32.6% of all fighter aircraft used by EU air forces coming from European collaborative production.¹⁷ Seen from this perspective, until now European defence-industrial autonomy does not appear to have been a major concern for EU member states, and, to the extent that it has been, governments still largely prefer national rather than European autonomy.

Autonomy as hedging

If autonomy as a greater responsibility displays a European recognition of the need to do more on security and defence, but leaves questions about defence-industrial autonomy unresolved, then the second vision of autonomy as strategic hedging may represent a more holistic reading. Given the uncertainties surrounding the transatlantic relationship, strategic hedging can be seen as a way to ensure that EU defence structures and policies are autonomous and effective enough to

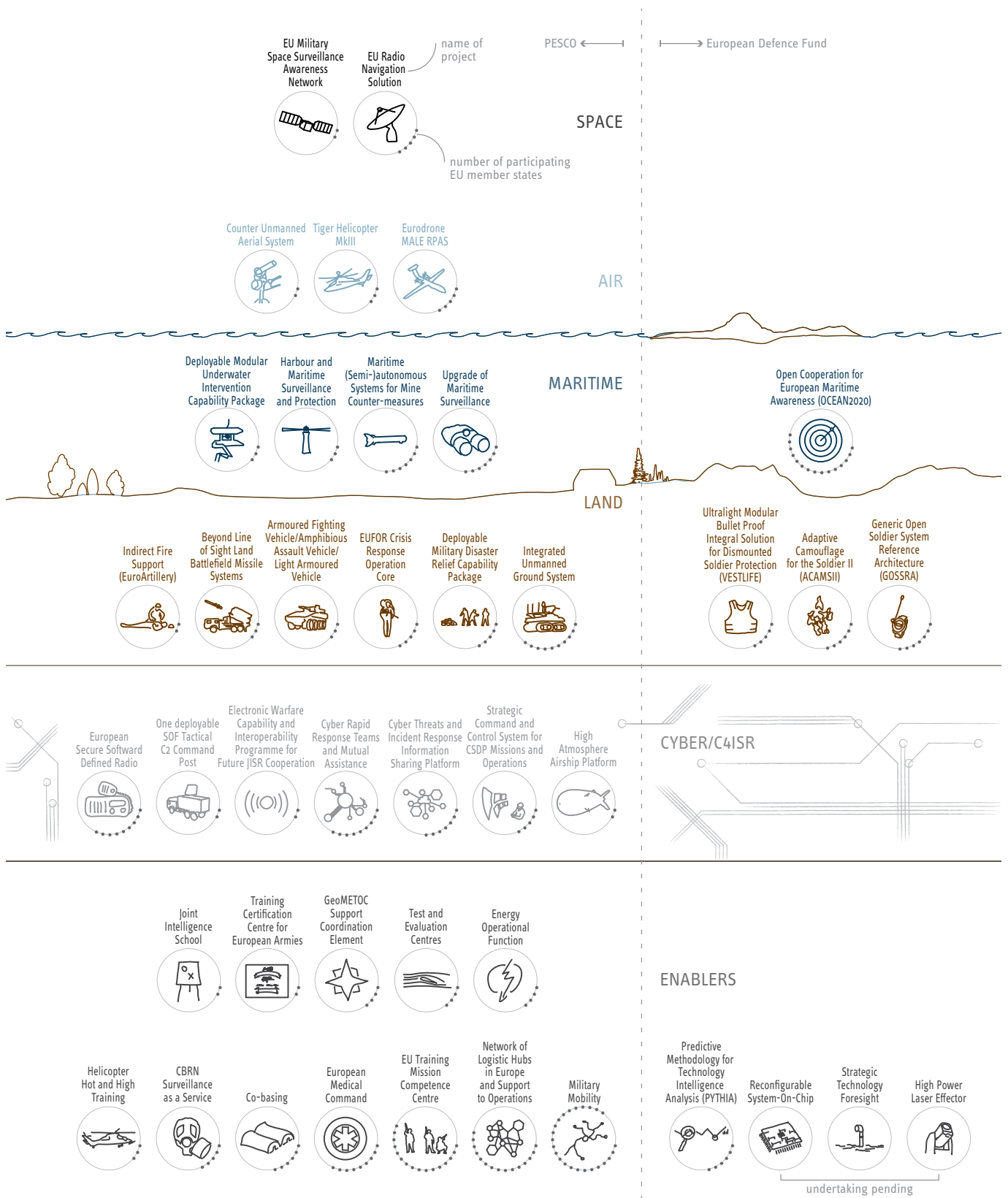
take on a range of military tasks should the US gradually withdraw from Europe over time. In this regard, 'strategic hedging behavior [*sic*] is meant to serve as a sort of *insurance policy* that guards against' a deterioration in relations between two actors

and/or should the hegemon cease to provide security to the hedging actor.¹⁸ Such an approach would certainly seem to address the present and longer-term trends in transatlantic security, and Europe would by no means be the only actor engaged in this sort of strategy (e.g. Japan)¹⁹.

To be clear, strategic hedging does not automatically diminish dependency on another actor or increase autonomy overall. What the concept does allow for, however, is for the EU to simultaneously maintain a favourable relationship with the US in diplomatic and economic terms while also focussing on specific domains that can help improve the EU's autonomy in key strategic areas such as the defence industry. Hedging could therefore be seen as a deft strategy to allow general alignment behind a hegemon, but with one eye on developing the capabilities needed for independent action. This could allow the EU to increase its strategic autonomy without necessarily damaging the transatlantic relationship or NATO. Accordingly, it is about the freedom to act

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Figure 2 | PESCO and EDF projects
as of November 2018



Data: European External Action Service, European Defence Agency, European Commission, 2018

autonomously for missions and operations, with greater freedom *from* US political authority and defence-industrial interests. Hedging comes with a proviso, however, because the strategy is usually associated with second-tier states and/or actors that may be in relative decline in the international system. This situation would reinforce the idea that continued dependency on the US is a way for the EU to avoid relative decline.

Strategic hedging has implications for the defence capabilities the EU is likely to develop in the future. For example, it is possible to view PESCO and the EDF as (albeit premature) instances of strategic hedging because the EU sees these initiatives as a way of developing an appropriate level of ‘freedom of action of the Union and its autonomy, in particular in technological and industrial terms’.²⁰ Unlike the vision for autonomy as more responsibility, hedging clearly includes an industrial dimension that emphasises the importance of Europe’s defence-industrial competitiveness and autonomy. As Figure 2 shows, EU member states and institutions are currently developing defence capabilities that are designed to support the Union’s operational and industrial autonomy. Although much more time is needed to see how these projects develop, there are currently 34 different PESCO projects designed to enhance the EU’s critical defence capabilities, including the Eurodrone MALE RPAS, Tiger Helicopter Mk III and the Integrated Unmanned Ground System projects. Taken together with other potential capability developments (e.g. future combat aircraft system), these PESCO projects are designed to allow the EU to hedge against its dependencies and the uncertainties it faces.

What would not be an example of strategic hedging, of course, is the development of high-end capabilities such as a nuclear deterrent. In any case, there appears to be no Europe-wide willingness for a ‘European nuclear deterrent’ at present. In many European countries such a level of autonomy would symbolise the end of the transatlantic relationship as we know it today, pose as a strategic liability for their national security and, for many states, violate their neutrality and/or constitutions. Most EU member states would not voluntarily forego protection under the US nuclear umbrella; not least because alongside nuclear deterrence comes the credible promise of a US response in the case of a conventional threat to Europe’s territorial integrity. Given these sensitivities, evidence of hedging can normally be found in initiatives that sit lower on the capability spectrum and which

are designed to enhance the EU’s operational and industrial autonomy in specific areas.

Autonomy as emancipation

Autonomy as hedging could be seen as an advance on greater responsibility because it allows for EU defence-industrial autonomy. However, advocates of a third vision of strategic autonomy as emancipation would argue that hedging and responsibility do not afford the EU the level of strategic autonomy required for it to deal with the multiple security challenges it faces.²¹ Emancipation understands that strategic hedging may actually reinforce European dependency on the US, and that far from accepting that the EU should be a second-tier power in relative decline, greater autonomy would allow the Union to reach its full potential as a global power. Emancipation is the most politically sensitive and the most radical vision of strategic autonomy. Advocates of emancipation tend to view strategic autonomy as an indivisible concept; the EU can either protect European territory and its global interests by relying on full spectrum capabilities that are produced and owned by European governments, or it cannot. As the argument goes, anything short of full autonomy is not worthy of the labels ‘strategic’ or ‘autonomy’.

The ultimate logic of this vision of strategic autonomy has far-reaching ramifications for the EU and its relationship with the world. Primarily, it would follow that the EU not only seeks freedom *from* the dependencies it has built up on the US over many decades, but that it has the ability to prevent becoming dependent on other powers such as China, too. This form of autonomy would go far beyond the EU’s current level of ambition in security and defence and it would imply a significant increase in defence

‘The understanding is that the EU cannot have operational and political autonomy without industrial autonomy.’

spending, plus the need to plan for deterrence in all its forms on European territory. It was already stated that the US has deployed up to 70,000 personnel through USEUCOM in Europe, but there are over 1.4 million

active personnel when the armed forces of the EU-28 are combined.²³ Of course, while the overall numbers for greater EU operational autonomy are there, this figure hides the very real fragmentation of Europe’s military forces along the lines of capability gaps, different strategic cultures and deployment patterns, a lack of common training, doctrine and language and much more. Additionally, the US is estimated to have invested up to €32 billion in European defence in 2018²⁴ and this would mean, should the EU take



up this expenditure to enhance its autonomy, it would need to increase defence spending by at least 16% or €32 billion on top of its current (albeit fragmented) investment of €200 billion.

This bill would no doubt increase significantly given the need for EU countries to develop the sorts of high-end defence capabilities (e.g. aircraft carriers, submarines, air defence, precision-guided munitions, space assets) required to be fully autonomous. Here, advocates of emancipation point to some of the perceived inconsistencies associated with debates about defence-industrial politics. Although European governments are being asked by the US to shoulder more responsibility for defence, they are simultaneously warned not to damage American defence-industrial interests in the process. While some EU member states argue that buying American equipment and taking up the burden in NATO go hand-in-hand, others ask whether it is wise to sacrifice Europe's defence and technological base in exchange for increased operational autonomy. As the argument goes, it is logically inconsistent to argue that US industrial autonomy is permitted while then denying Europe the freedom to support its own defence industry. The understanding is that the EU cannot have operational and political autonomy without industrial autonomy.

Freedom *from* and freedom *to*...

The three visions of autonomy outlined in this Brief highlight the different meanings strategic autonomy embodies. On this basis, it should be stressed that autonomy is not a binary choice (of either having autonomy or not) but rather a spectrum that represents different degrees of autonomy and dependency. Autarky in security and defence is extremely difficult to achieve and some dependencies may be useful for the EU. Autonomy as emancipation is the closest one can get to full autonomy, but the EU is not presently seeking strategic emancipation from all of its dependencies. The constellation of national interests in the EU does not yet permit it and the Union does not have the required defence capabilities or strategic culture, either.

Based on the three forms of autonomy described in this Brief, something that sits somewhere between responsibility and hedging is the most convincing characterisation of EU autonomy in security and defence at this stage. Whether the EU will ever be ready or willing to step over the

strategic threshold from hedging to emancipation remains to be seen.

In this sense, the EU institutions have been quite clear about the Union's objectives. EU-NATO cooperation has advanced, and, with projects such as military mobility, the EU is trying to address specific US strategic concerns. Furthermore, following on from the EU Global Strategy both the Council of the EU and the European Commission

have reiterated that initiatives such as PESCO and the EDF are geared towards enhancing the EU's operational and industrial autonomy.²⁵ What is more, the Council has

been very clear that there needs to be an appropriate level of European strategic autonomy as far as the development, replacement and operation of defence capabilities and key strategic technology areas are concerned.²⁶ These ambitions cater to the EU's freedom to act as a crisis management actor. There is as yet no consensus on whether the Union should move beyond this level of ambition.

Despite this current state of affairs, it is worth reflecting on trends that may affect European debates about strategic autonomy. Ultimately, the obvious driver conditioning European approaches to autonomy is US strategy. Inescapably, if Washington's strategic trajectory is towards the Indo-Pacific then greater demands on Europe to take up more of the security burden will occur, even though the EU may not wish to be entangled in US interests in this part of the world. Europe no longer appears to be the centre of gravity in US strategic thinking, and the Trump administration has made it quite clear that it is preparing itself for a future of strategic rivalry with Beijing.²⁷

Additionally, Brexit poses a challenge in terms of how we even define 'Europe'. Proposals such as the European Intervention Initiative appear to allow for European (and not just EU) operational autonomy, but initiatives such as the EDF are geared to ensuring EU (rather than European) defence-industrial autonomy. Therefore, how the words 'Europe' and 'autonomy' are combined matters greatly. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly for the EU, it is clear that there can be no meaningful EU strategic autonomy if it simply comes to mean any single nation's version of autonomy writ large for the Union. A shared European notion of autonomy is needed now more than ever.

Lastly, debates about strategic autonomy in Europe are currently focussing on growing differences with the US. It is certainly the case that

'Europe no longer appears to be the centre of gravity in US strategic thinking.'



recent American policy is puzzling Europe, yet it would be a strategic error to define European autonomy solely in relation to Washington's behaviour and interests. The EU currently sits at the heart of a web of political, economic and security dependencies. Some are welcome, but others less so. If the EU's principal strategic goal is to maintain the very multilateral order that has allowed the Union to flourish, then more attention needs to be placed on all sorts of potentially harmful dependencies that the EU has with Russia, China and other countries. If the EU is to avoid the second-tier status or relative decline associated with strategic hedging, then member states must think hard about the strategic environment they are likely to inherit in the coming decades. Ultimately, they need to ask themselves whether greater responsibility and hedging is a desirable or sustainable long-term strategy or whether they would be instead willing to shoulder the huge – yet perhaps imperative – political and economic challenges associated with emancipation.

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Endnotes

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