

Washington should help Europe achieve ‘Strategic Autonomy,’ not fight it



In 2016, the European Union issued its Global Strategy, the union’s latest foreign and security policy strategy document. The strategy “nurtures the ambition of strategic autonomy for the European Union.” American policymakers’ feelings about these aspirations are, to say the least, mixed. Several U.S. officials have expressed fear that a strategically autonomous Europe would be detrimental to the transatlantic alliance. Kay Bailey Hutchison, the U.S. ambassador to NATO, issued warnings about the direction of Europe’s plans for more defense cooperation. Katie Wheelbarger, principal deputy secretary of defense for international security affairs, emphasized, “We don’t want to see EU efforts pulling requirements or forces away from NATO and into the EU.” Not even a year after President Donald Trump heated up the debate about burden-sharing between America and Europe, things seem to have come full circle, back to days thought long gone – when Washington warned Europeans of “ganging up” on the United States during the 1990s.

There are many reasons to be skeptical of this new yet age-old debate. First, Washington has a poor understanding of the current intra-European debate, its core notion of strategic autonomy, and its implications, a shortcoming that has its roots in the fact that Europeans themselves have not fully defined the concept. Second, it is in America’s interest for Europeans to attain (or at least move closer to) strategic autonomy. Washington should embrace and support European endeavors, specifically by reassuring its skeptical allies across the Atlantic that it does indeed want a strategically autonomous Europe. The worry for Washington should not be that Europeans strive for strategic autonomy. The real worry should be that they might not make it.

Strategic Autonomy: Confusion Inside and Outside the European Union

Since the Global Strategy was published, with its much-touted call for strategic autonomy, the European Union’s Common Security and Defence Policy has made

great strides toward something vaguely resembling the concept. As a result of shifts in the geopolitical environment and within the union itself – most notably, Brexit, which brought about the need to demonstrate internally that European integration was not dead – members have agreed on a number of measures, several of which are intended to increase states' ability to carry out military operations. These include extending the common funding for EU Battlegroups (the European Union's rapid reaction forces thus far never deployed due to the absence of political consensus); establishing a Military Planning and Conduct Capability for non-executive missions such as training missions that states conduct within the Common Security and Defense Policy framework; and activating Permanent Structured Cooperation, which allows “whose military capabilities fulfill higher criteria and which have made more binding commitments ... with a view to the most demanding missions” to cooperate more closely.

In addition, the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence is meant to institutionalize a systematic exchange among member states to help identify and close gaps in military resources. Finally, a European Defence Fund is intended to incentivize cooperation on defense capabilities development and acquisitions by co-financing initiatives under which member states join forces to develop and procure products and technologies. Besides allowing for economies of scale, the aim is also to eventually lead to a consolidated European defense technological and industrial base. In light of its rather limited size, it remains to be seen whether the fund will profoundly impact European industrial structures and political preferences in arms acquisitions.

But none of these steps reflect a clear understanding of what “European strategic autonomy” would mean. Confusingly, despite its emphasis on strategic autonomy, the global strategy document takes a rather inward-looking approach, saying the “European Global Strategy starts at home. [...] An appropriate level of ambition and strategic autonomy is important for Europe's ability to promote peace and security within and beyond its borders. We will therefore enhance our efforts on defense, cyber, counterterrorism, energy, and strategic communications.” If European strategic autonomy is poorly understood in Washington, this is because the situation is not much different in Europe itself. Only France seems to have a clear-cut idea of the concept's scope and content. Paris defined it in its 2013 Defense White Paper as the French state's ability to decide and to act freely in an

interdependent world, but notably, this definition was particular to the national level, not a collective European effort. Most other member states don't seem to have really thought about it. The German government, for example, avoids the term in its recent strategic documents: the 2016 German White Paper contains no reference to the notion, nor does the 2018 coalition agreement.

One can certainly blame the Europeans for taking the second step before the first – seeking improvements in capabilities generation, operations, and procurement while avoiding discussion of the *political* dimension of strategic autonomy. Europeans obviously need to work on their operational autonomy (the capacity to plan for and conduct civilian and military operations based on the necessary institutional framework and capabilities) and industrial autonomy (the ability to develop and build the capabilities needed to attain operational autonomy). But these two dimensions should be complemented by clearly defined foreign and security policy goals and an understanding of which tools will be used in their pursuit. Such a strategic vision of Europe's security environment and the European Union interests that should be pursued whether collectively or by individual members is, for now, missing. The flurry of defense-focused initiatives without an accompanying discussion of the political or strategic thinking behind them has, somewhat understandably, led Washington to fill the void with its worst-case thinking.

The United States Has Nothing to Worry About

Though little may be clear about Europe's strategic autonomy, one thing that is well-defined is that the concept does not mean turning Europe's back on the United States and on transatlantic security. Our private discussions with analysts and policymakers have shown that there simply are no calls for "strategic independence" from Washington or anything resembling it. No one in Europe is seriously reasoning along these lines, not even the French. Although France first articulated the notion of strategic autonomy, this does not mean Paris is pushing for the old dream of European emancipation from Washington. On the contrary. As Alice Pannier noted on *War on the Rocks*, last year's French "Strategic Review" emphasizes that the United States is a "fundamental partner." Paris' general approach to defense cooperation under Macron is pragmatic: "whatever works" is the key formula when it comes to institutional settings, with a special emphasis on operational cooperation.

Europe has moved beyond ideologically driven efforts to build a counterweight to American power. Emancipation from the United States is clearly no longer on the agenda for anyone. European governments recognize that the United States is and will remain their most important geopolitical ally. Likewise, no one contests NATO's role in collective defense. The European Union debate about strategic autonomy is exclusively about crisis management and operations outside the union, not about collective defense, deterring Russia, or replacing NATO — indeed, the EU's Lisbon Treaty unequivocally states that the Union's Common and Security and Defense Policy is about “missions outside the Union for peace-keeping, conflict prevention, and strengthening international security.”

It thus makes little sense for U.S.-skeptical Europeanists to pit themselves against Atlanticists as if we were back in de Gaulle's 1960s or the post-Cold War 1990s. And on the other side of the ocean, U.S. resistance to a strong Europe should belong to the past as well. It should be remembered that not too long ago, Washington's views on European autonomy had evolved to the point that President George W. Bush encouraged the build-up of “a strong European defense capacity” at NATO's 2008 Bucharest summit. Bush was right: Strengthening the European Union as a security provider is the key step toward fairer transatlantic burden-sharing, a long-standing U.S. request vis-à-vis Europe. If Europeans are taking steps to get serious with their Common Security and Defense Policy in the wake of Brexit, this is good news for the United States. A strategically autonomous Europe is no threat to transatlantic security, but, in light of ever-decreasing resources, increasing isolationist tendencies in America, and a gloomy global security environment, a prerequisite for it. U.S. fears are misplaced, as for instance Brooks Tigner of *Jane's Defense Weekly*, notes in a well-informed analysis. Only a Europe that does not depend on the United States for almost everything can unburden U.S. armed forces in various theaters in Africa and the Middle East, areas where both Americans and Europeans have interests but that are more easily accessible to the former.

A Constructive Role for Washington: Reassuring European Skeptics

The ball clearly lies in the Europeans' court. Paul Zajac has rightly argued that Washington must let its European allies find their own path. As ever, the duo to provide the political leadership in this process is the so-called Franco-German tandem. With President Emmanuel Macron's clearly-stated ambitions for Europe and the German government, Chancellor Angela Merkel's fourth, finally in

place, the window of opportunity is open although political and cultural obstacles are high. Together, Paris and Berlin can – and have already pledged to – address operational and industrial cooperation, capabilities development, and acquisitions.

But the one issue France and Germany will not be able to solve on their own and from within the European Union is easing fears in Warsaw and other skeptical capitals that a stronger European defense is incompatible with American involvement in European security affairs. This is where Washington comes in: It should reassure its most Atlanticist European friends and allies – found to the North and especially to the East of the European Union – that a strengthened European defense does not come at the price of weaker transatlantic ties, but rather the opposite. Whether voiced openly such as in Poland, or more discretely behind closed doors, fears of alienating the United States is the elephant in the room in Europe's security debate. These skeptical countries in fact trust the United States far more than the Europeans when it comes to ensuring their survival.

In reality, strategic autonomy is not about choosing between “America” or “Europe,” nor between “reassurance” or “fighting terrorists in the South,” another axis of disagreement between Western and Eastern European countries. Moreover, if the fear of alienating Washington were off the table, Europeans might be able to start discussing strategic autonomy and a strengthened defense more constructively. If Washington clearly declared its support – and, indeed, expectation – for intensified European Union efforts, a number of knots could be untied in Europe. After all, most countries understand very well the need to invest in a strong national defense to safeguard their close bilateral ties with Washington. Why should the same principle not apply to the security relationship between the United States and Europe as a supranational entity? A show of support from U.S. policymakers could clear the way for Europe to eventually fill the still-unclear notion of strategic autonomy with operationalizable meaning.

The Real Question: The Future Transatlantic Security Relationship

Once this understanding is reached, Europe and the United States can finally start an even more necessary transatlantic debate: one about the future of Euro-Atlantic security, fair burden-sharing, defense acquisition, market access, and potential geographical and functional divisions of labor. This discussion is

desperately needed to lay the foundations for transatlantic security in the 21st century. But before it can happen, Europeans must define and implement strategic autonomy in all three of its dimensions.

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