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Strategic military autonomy of the European Union

European Council for Foreign Affairs (ECf)

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Introduction

In our current era, there are a multitude of issues and world conflicts that threaten the security and stability of people and countries alike. Political conflicts over the decades have created both alliances and strains amongst nations. Despite the goal of many alliances, treaties, and organisations being peace and security, certain countries remain dissatisfied with a lack of autonomy in the area of defense. Since the beginning of the Cold War, Europe's defense has been a prominent issue. It is in this context that NATO was formed and directly engaged the U.S. with Europe's defense against the Soviet Union. Strategic Autonomy is a term that refers to the capacity of a country or a political community to act independently for its defense and/or security. Although strategic autonomy can also refer to factors such as economic independence, it is primarily used in a *military* context, as it is the most pressing and important facet of the issue. In the context of the EU especially, the concern continues to grow as Europe's guarantees of protection (by the U.S.) begin to loosen. Additionally, Europe's relationship with other key parties further complicates the issue at hand. In the previous decade, Europe has increasingly faced threats within the continent that have caused EU member states to desire less reliance on external powers, namely the U.S., due to the overlap with the EU and NATO. The concept has since evolved into a broader strategic objective comprising technological, political, and economic factors.

The origin of 'Strategic Autonomy' dates back to the 1960s, where the concept was first proposed by France in a primarily NATO context, however it was officially introduced into the EU's Global Strategy/Defense policy, in 2013. Furthermore, in 2016 it was made a core ambition, whereby the EU highlighted its importance as a tool to promote peace and security. Within these policies, the EU's main initial focus was achieving a balance between inward-looking defense and outward-looking military projection. This translates to protecting national territories whilst engaging international peace and security operations. This objective would give the EU the ability to defend itself and also act globally, if necessary. Several factors and conflicts have pushed the urgency for Strategic Military Autonomy, including issues such as COVID and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Both are key drivers which have exposed the vulnerability of the EU economically and politically. This has reinforced the necessity for a more sustainable and competitive defense industry. Despite the strong inclination many EU nations have to adopt such frameworks, there are still numerous challenges and limitations the EU faces in its pursuit of Military Autonomy. Although some progress has been achieved, Europe remains dependent on the U.S. for certain military capabilities, intelligence, and nuclear deterrence, and the Russia-Ukraine war evidently revealed the defensive and operational capacity limits of Europe. Strategic Military Autonomy would allow for member-states to make independent decisions regarding defense, and implementing them without any reliance on external stakeholders. This once again emphasises why this issue should be vigorously debated on to reach an appropriate solution that leaves all relevant parties satisfied.

Definition of key terms

Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP)

The Common Foreign and Security Policy is the EU's agreed foreign policy. The principal focus of the CFSP is defense and security.

European Defense Fund (EDF)

The EDF is a fund managed by the European Commission. It is primarily financed by the EU's multiannual budget framework.

European Security Strategy (ESS)

The European Security Strategy is the document containing the EU's strategy for security. The document explicates how the EU aims to achieve a more secure Europe, by identifying threats and defining strategic objectives including Strategic Autonomy.

External Action

This refers to the EU's actions regarding international affairs and their relationship with foreign states and organisations.

Power

The ability to do something or act in a certain way. To have power over someone or something means to be able to influence the course of their actions.

Sovereignty

Sovereignty is the authority of a state to govern itself (or another state), both in domestic and foreign policy without interference from any other actors..

Strategic Autonomy

Strategic Autonomy (in the context of the EU) refers to the capacity of EU member states to act independently of any other power for its defense and security. It is the main topic of this issue and Research Report.

General Overview

Strategic Military Autonomy remains a complex issue with many aspects and challenges that must be overcome for the EU to achieve their defense ambitions. There are multiple parties that have notably influenced the evolution of the issue at hand, and there are several factors that play into the emergence of Strategic Military Autonomy.

Within policies, the EU has previously aimed to and also seeks to improve unity among member-states, and political integration is fundamental to achieving Strategic Autonomy. Different national interests and perceptions of threat become burdens in reaching a consensus. Each nation has different strategic and budgetary priorities and policies, which make it all the more strenuous to make coherent progress. Institutions such as but not limited to the European Council, the European Commission, and the European Parliament all bear the responsibility of policy-making and where appropriate, allotting the appropriate funds. Despite this, the EU still has difficulty in balancing sovereignty with collective action which has stagnated the development and integration of Strategic Military Autonomy. Coordination and military mobility continue to be priorities for improvement.

Donald Trump and rising tensions

During both terms of Trump's presidency, the EU has faced significantly more pressure that has both hindered progress of integrating Strategic Military Autonomy, and has also accelerated the need for it. Trump has had a very direct approach with NATO and Europe. In 2016, Trump revealed that if Russia were to attack the Baltic states, he would look to whether they have fulfilled their obligations to the U.S., furthermore Trump has threatened European countries to withdraw the U.S. forces from them, his reasoning being that they should pay more for the protection of the U.S. Another prominent example of how the Trump administration has intensified the situation is Trump's statements during the 2024 elections in the U.S. In response to an unnamed NATO country leader asking him whether the U.S. would protect them if they did not pay, and Russia attacked them, Trump has said that he would not protect 'delinquent' countries. He also stated that if this scenario were to take place, he would encourage the Russians to 'do whatever they wanted'.

> Although this is not the way NATO works, Trump has repeatedly made out NATO to be a protection service for Europe, in which member-states pay the U.S. for security. In reality, NATO member-states do not pay any dues, nor owe the U.S. any money. Trump's attitude towards the situation has rendered the EU unsure of what steps to take. Europe has been left weighing the benefits and limitations of relying less on the U.S whilst losing protection from them. In this way, Trump's forthright statements have been important contributors to the emergence of autonomous policies in the EU.

Additional problems with the integration of Strategic Military Autonomy

In addition to political relations (mainly with the U.S), the EU also faces several economic challenges with developing Strategic Autonomy. The first of many being Europe's weaknesses in its supply chain. Crises like COVID-19, the energy dependence on Russia and disrupted access to crucial raw materials, for example have further complexified the situation. In some respects, the EU is also less technologically advanced compared to Asia or America, which has also presented obstacles in the course of current efforts. The EU is behind in areas such as A.I. and digital infrastructure, and these become causes for weakness in security and economic competitiveness.

Furthermore, another large concern of implementing Strategic Autonomy is funding. There is a certain ambiguity and lack of how the EU plans to finance the scale of required investments. Cost is a major concern, streamlining the EU's military capabilities and technology cannot be covered by public budget alone and this has significantly hindered the progress for Strategic military Autonomy. The EU plans to spend approximately 800 billion euros on defense by 2030.

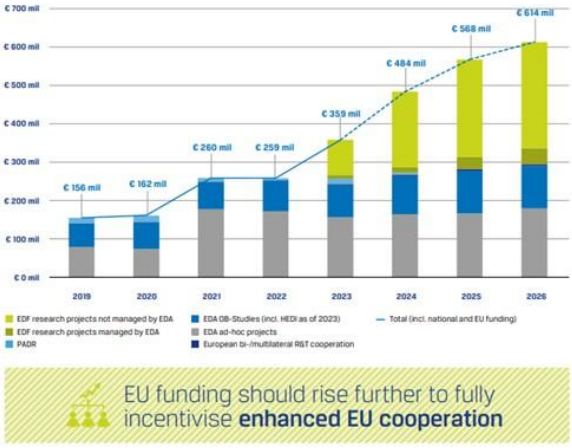

Figure 1. EU Defense Spending (2019-2026)

Current Progress and Recent Developments

Since 2013, the European Council has shifted focus to strengthening European defense and aiming to integrate autonomy into the EU's current frameworks. The European Commission has also proposed measures denominated as 'ReArm Europe' which simplify regulations for investment and focus on advancing technology and the European defense industry.

- #### *Defense Strategy March 2025*

On March 19 2025, the European Commission published a paper (The White Paper for European Defense) in which the EU's defense strategy for 2030 was discussed, whereby the need for further investment and collaboration were emphasised. The paper covered threat assessments, priorities for defense, and gaps in capability. There is also a novel urgency to speed up the development of these ambitions, motivated particularly by the Trump administration.

Major parties involved

European Union (EU)

The main party involved; The EU has made consistent attempts over the past decade to adopt and progress Strategic Autonomy, subsequently due to continuous aggression of the Russian Federation, especially since the Russian annexation of Crimea (in 2014), and the recent situation of Russia and Ukraine, which the EU has perceived as a potential threat.

France

France has played a pivotal role in the introduction of Strategic Autonomy as a concept. It was the first state to argue that Europe should have the capacity to act independently from the U.S. During the time of the Cold War (1945-1989), France withdrew from NATO's integrated military command (1963) with reasons of dissatisfaction with the US. In 1994, France published its own White Paper for Defense, where it introduced Strategic Autonomy as part of its own defense policy. Even now, France, under the leadership of Emmanuel Macron, has further advocated for Strategic Autonomy to 'avoid becoming America's followers' and is one of the strongest drivers for these plans.

North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)

NATO plays a crucial role in this issue, considering that they are a major stakeholder in the matter. The purpose of NATO has commonly been elucidated as 'To keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down', a phrase coined by Lord Hasting Lionel Ismay, the first Secretary-General of NATO. 'Keeping the Americans in' is one of the reasons many EU countries face complications in implementing Strategic Military Autonomy. 21 of 27 EU countries are also members of NATO. The alliance has created great reliance on the U.S. for military capabilities and nuclear deterrence, and has therefore made it more difficult for member states of both organisations to make progress with Strategic Military Autonomy.

Russia

Russia's vital role in the issue stems from its recurring aggression, especially against Ukraine, which has catalysed the EU's push for Strategic Military Autonomy. Russia and the EU have an enduring strained relationship, and Russia has placed all EU member-states on a list of 'unfriendly countries'. Russia's long-term hostility against the EU, and recent developments with Ukraine have made the EU establish Russia as a significant threat. In addition to this, the EU lacks a comprehensive strategy in order to confront these events, and their lack of Military Autonomy also leaves them vulnerable.

United States of America (USA)

The USA is the most critical external stakeholder of the issue at hand. Due to the framework of NATO, many EU member states are heavily reliant on the USA for defense and military capabilities. In both 2017-2021, and present time, under the Trump administration, the EU has faced significantly more pressure and tension with the adoption of strategic autonomy. Donald Trump has made several comments in relation to Europe's desires to become more autonomous, and act more independently, most notably in February 2024 where Donald Trump stated that he would not protect 'delinquent' NATO members. This disclosure has since made it more difficult to move forward with plans of Strategic Autonomy, however it has also intensified the necessity for it.

Timeline of events

1994 April 29th	France publishes its *'Livre blanc sur la défense et la sécurité nationale'*	France formally introduced the concept of Strategic Autonomy into its own defense policy.
2013 December	EU Global Strategy	The EU called for the strengthening of defense, and made Strategic Military Autonomy a main ambition.
2016 December 8th	NATO summit in Warsaw	European leaders signed the first EU-NATO joint declaration aiming to strengthen coordination.
2017 January 20th	Trump takes office	Donald Trump is inaugurated as the 45th president of the U.S.
2020 June	The European Defense fund allocates significant funding to research and development	€7.9 billion is aimed towards collaborative defense research and capability projects.
2022 February 24th	Russian invasion of Ukraine	Russia invades Ukraine, dramatically accelerating EU defense cooperation.
2024 January 20th	Trump makes controversial statements regarding NATO	Trump states that he would not protect 'delinquent' countries.
2025 January 20th	Trump' s second term	Donald Trump begins his second term as U.S. president and places pressure on Europe again.
2025 March 6th	ReArm Europe	The 'ReArm Europe' plan is proposed

Possible solutions

There are a few ways this issue could be solved and better navigated. Despite the history behind it, Strategic Military Autonomy is still very much a contemporary issue, and requires collaboration and careful planning to make further progress. Additionally, because of o
Therefore, possible solutions include:

1. *Increased collaboration and joint capability development*

   Joint initiatives for advancing defense capabilities under the EDF for example, would allow for member-states to equally and efficiently grow their military and advance their defense and security systems. With equitable contributions of resources from all states, there would also be economic benefits; increased production leading to proportionate savings in cost (economy of scale).

2. *Focus on strengthening technology and European Defense industry*

   Targeted investment towards research and development in technology and military capabilities are critical steps in advancing Strategic Military Autonomy. A thorough discussion and creation of frameworks that put emphasis on securing the supply chain within Europe would also contribute to these advancements and reduce reliance on external powers. Similar measures have most notably been taken in 2025 such as the ‘ReArm Europe’ plan, and the White Paper for European Defense which have set goals for 2030.

3. *Improving military mobility and defense decision making*

   Enhanced military mobility and swift action are crucial factors of modern security. Legislative measures that allow rapid cross-border movement of troops and equipment can address mobility, while a unified decision making system that aligns with the common EU interests would ensure that EU forces can effectively respond to crises.

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