



European Strategic Autonomy: The Path to a Geopolitical Europe

Tara Varma

To cite this article: Tara Varma (2024) European Strategic Autonomy: The Path to a Geopolitical Europe, *The Washington Quarterly*, 47:1, 65-83, DOI: [10.1080/0163660X.2024.2327820](https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2024.2327820)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2024.2327820>



Published online: 15 Apr 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

European Strategic Autonomy: The Path to a Geopolitical Europe

Strategic autonomy is a loaded expression in Europe, one which inspires strong feelings from both its detractors and its advocates. By laying out the nuances of the phrase and the reasons it has entered European parlance, this paper aims to show that strategic autonomy is less controversial than many presume.

There are at least two faces to European strategic autonomy: the formal, bureaucratic, institutional one—which has seen European institutions like the European Parliament and the European Council adopt conclusions clearly formulating strategic autonomy as an objective for the European Union (EU) as far back as 2013. The other face of it is more controversial, leading to heated debates in Europe about the necessity of strategic autonomy itself—paraphrasing the definition presented in the 1994 French White Paper on defense, European strategic autonomy is generally defined as the capacity to act independently in an interdependent world. It is not synonymous with autarky, but it does require developing a capacity to act, in particular in traditional security fields where Europe has relied on US support for the past 70 years.

For Europeans, the security guarantee provided by the United States through NATO remains existential—even if there are internal debates about how best to be an effective ally to Washington. Meanwhile, the US position has often been ambiguous. While US administrations past and present, regardless of their political affiliation, have called for Europeans to do their part, they have also warned

Tara Varma is a visiting fellow at the Center on the United States and Europe at the Brookings Institution and was previously a senior policy fellow and the head of the Paris office of the European Council on Foreign Relations. She can be reached at TVarma@brookings.edu and followed on X @tara_varma.

© 2024 The Elliott School of International Affairs
The Washington Quarterly • 47:1 pp. 65–83
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2024.2327820>

against decoupling, duplicating and discriminating defense efforts that would undermine NATO.¹ Even under Donald Trump, whose disregard for NATO and military alliances is well-known, Europeans were heavily criticized for stepping up efforts to build common European defense capabilities with projects like the European Defence Fund and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO).²

Europeans cannot afford to avoid the pressing question of their capacity to act, in Europe and globally

Since then, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and subsequent European support for Ukraine, the upcoming US presidential election and a potential US retreat from Europe, and an increasingly changing European political landscape have all led to calls within Europe, inside and outside the European Union, to assume greater autonomy and power and to define the means and ends of said power. This concept can be variously termed European strategic autonomy, European sovereignty, or

European strategic agency, but one thing is certain: Europeans cannot afford to avoid the pressing question of their capacity to act, not just in their immediate neighborhood but also on a global stage increasingly pressurized by US-China tensions.

This paper will look at how some drivers of greater strategic autonomy are accelerating its necessity, from the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2024 US presidential elections to the consequences of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the changing European political landscape. It will also seek to understand what strategic autonomy means, both from an institutional and practical point of view. The paper then turns to the questions of solidarity and nuclear elements which underpin the quest for strategic autonomy, and ends on the need to begin a new chapter for Europe and its defense.

The Drivers of Greater Strategic Autonomy: It's Inevitable

This section examines four key drivers of greater European strategic autonomy: the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a changing European political landscape, and the 2024 US presidential elections.

Public Health and the Pandemic: A Strategic Reckoning

Although the COVID-19 pandemic affected EU members differently, the common reckoning faced in the early spring of 2020 was how dependent they

were on third-party countries—in particular, India and China—for critical supplies of medication and strategic materials like ventilators and masks. EU member states rapidly realized how vulnerable this dependency left them in the face of unforeseen developments like a pandemic, when countries on which they relied heavily could suddenly decide to deny them access to needed goods. This forced a change in views toward the interdependency which had been at the heart of Europe’s economic success, and toward the promise of prosperity the project intrinsically carried. That change took a fairly long time and included several difficult discussions over the role of the EU.

Indeed, at the beginning of the pandemic, the pandemic’s effect on member states differed in terms of death numbers and levels of shortage of critical materials. These differing situations led to differing solutions and prioritizations. The need for solidarity, evident for Italy or France who were deeply affected, wasn’t so evident to Nordic countries, where deaths were much lower. Hence, when some EU member states pushed for financial and material solidarity, they were faced with strong resistance from the so-called “frugal states”—who didn’t think that the EU had a role to play. After weeks of discussions, the EU made the unprecedented decision to agree to common borrowing, which ultimately led to the €800 billion Next Generation EU plan, still in force today.

Simultaneously in the United States, during the early days of the lockdown, President Donald Trump was very intent on fighting Europeans over access to vaccines, as he tried to acquire German biotech company CureVac and other strategic medical equipment.³ His then-economic adviser Peter Navarro declared on Fox News that “in crises like this, we have no allies.”⁴ These declarations didn’t come as a shock, as Trump had already referred to the EU as a foe in previous declarations, but they confirmed the need for the EU to organize itself, all the while championing the global health agenda and multilateral action in favor of more accessible health services.⁵

The COVID-19 pandemic also showed EU member states that, much like the defense or telecoms industry, the health system is an integral part of security infrastructure. As such, ensuring health security is “tantamount to ensuring the ability of societies to function, economies to prosper, and nations to compete in geopolitical competition. Health emergencies can also erode democracy and human rights at home, perhaps permanently, as we have already seen during the current crisis.”⁶ Since health is not part of the EU’s set of competencies as defined in the EU treaty, health care remains a prerogative of individual member states and they generally don’t have to consult with other member states or EU institutions to make decisions on the health agenda. But the weaponization of health by Russia and China during the COVID-19 pandemic—through aggressive disinformation campaigns and the confiscation of medical material—pushed the EU to provide a more adequate immediate common

response, as well as to prepare jointly for future scenarios where cooperation would be essential.⁷ Thus, the EU reinforced the early warning capacities of the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC); ensured the availability of medicines; enabled joint procurement of medical and protective equipment; ensured the stockpiling and distribution of critical equipment such as ventilators, personal protective equipment, reusable masks, vaccines, and therapeutics laboratory supplies; increased European production capabilities; and put forward additional financial support through the EU Solidarity Fund.⁸

It was also during the COVID-19 pandemic that the taboo of debt mutualization was broken during the European Council of July 2020, when then-chancellor Angela Merkel reversed Germany's position—she had been fiercely against mutualizing debt, alongside the frugal camp.⁹ Debt mutualization is also known as joint borrowing, a controversial proposition as it tends to crudely divide those who benefit from the borrowing and those who contribute to it, and thus

The pandemic led the EU to strengthen itself and its capacity to act

poses important questions about financial solidarity inside the Union—a topic still raw from the fallout of the 2008-2012 financial crisis when a cleavage between Northern and Southern European countries emerged as Southern Europe then felt the brunt of the austerity measures imposed by international financial institutions and a tough Germany.¹⁰

In 2020, in light of an absent US hegemon, the EU had to make the unprecedented decision of betting on itself and borrowing for itself, despite vast differences in the economies of EU member states. The grave state of the Union, its economies, and the need to embody solidarity amidst the pandemic led the EU to break this taboo and strengthen itself and its capacity to act.

The pandemic and its aftershocks didn't make the EU give up on international cooperation and trade—it still pursues an agenda of active interdependence—but after COVID-19, it is now more conscious of how it can use some of its assets in a competition with rivals. Building on this new approach, the EU has endorsed the idea of pursuing a geopolitical agenda, meaning it has decided to put its geography at the service of its internal and external policies. The strategic reckoning the COVID-19 pandemic represented for the EU confirmed that health security was part of a larger security infrastructure the Union needed to invest in. For the EU, it also provided a reckoning with the fact that interdependence for the sake of it isn't always a goal to pursue, while by contrast strategic autonomy—coupling interdependence with a strategic vision—is the ultimate goal of the EU's newfound quest to protect itself while preserving its intrinsic openness.

Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: A Strategic Awakening

If the COVID-19 pandemic was a moment of strategic reckoning for Europeans, it was Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 which led to a strategic awakening inside the EU. Strategic autonomy couldn't just cover non-traditional security realms anymore. It had to encompass hard security, as well—another taboo for the EU to overcome. Now, more than two years into the war, Europe has had to overcome two main shocks: the return of war on the continent for the first time since the Balkan wars of the 1990s, and the necessity for Europe to mitigate the effects of the very dependencies that once formed the bedrock of its prosperity—i.e. its reliance on Russian oil and gas. The responses to these two shocks meant Europe needed to become a sovereign power.

When Russia invaded Ukraine, after months of global debate about the likelihood of the invasion launched by an unprecedented declassification campaign by the US, political and strategic coordination between the US and Europe was at an all-time high. Although Europeans and Americans were still in shock that a permanent member of the UN Security Council had gone out of its way to violate the UN charter, they immediately—and together—deemed Russia's action an attack on the international order.¹¹

The vehemence and unity of the European reaction was notably spurred by the remarkable resistance of the Ukrainians.¹² The intelligence reports that Americans and Europeans were receiving indicated a high probability of Kyiv falling to Russia in a matter of three to four days. However, in the face of incredible local resistance, it was clear that the EU had to step up and make explicit that defending Ukraine was existential to the future of the Union. Beyond Ukraine itself, one of the initial fears was that the conflict could spill over into NATO territory adjacent to Ukraine. Putin's invasion also made EU states realize that if they didn't come to Ukraine's aid, they would never be fully safe from him either. To that end, the EU has steadfastly coordinated with NATO ever since.¹³ The change experienced here is that the EU and NATO worked together, with EU institutions and alongside as well as with the member states, to take unprecedented action for Ukraine. In the past, the expectation would have been for the US to carry the effort on its own, as the EU wasn't thought of as a security provider. But in the face of Russia's brutal attack and of the EU's newly-realized responsibilities, the fates of the EU and Ukraine are now inseparably intertwined.

In the hours that followed the invasion, the EU repeatedly approved massive sanctions packages against Russia and voted to deliver financial, material and humanitarian aid to Ukraine. In a span of months, the EU effectively freed itself from its dependence on Russian oil and gas and succeeded in achieving as much unity as possible in efforts to isolate Russia. It seemed like the EU was deploying its usual toolbox.¹⁴ However, the choice to deliver lethal weapons

Ukraine sparked a paradigm shift: the EU now sees itself as a security provider

through the European Peace Facility (EPF) mechanism—an off-budget instrument aimed at enhancing the EU’s ability to prevent conflicts, build peace, and strengthen international security, enabling the financing of operational actions that have military or defense implications—demonstrated how serious

the EU was about contributing to Ukraine and ensuring a victory in the biggest land war in Europe since World War II.¹⁵ Reflecting the gravity of the moment, this was the first time in the EU’s history that it had been involved in delivering lethal weapons, let alone to a country that is not (yet) a member of the EU or NATO. Since the implementation of the EPF, a proposal to move forward on joint procurement for ammu-

nitions and missiles for Ukraine has gone forward, and another proposal to jointly produce these ammunitions in the EU was adopted in May 2023.¹⁶ While these steps may not be enough to provide Ukraine with all the weapons it needs to win decisively, one cannot overstate the paradigm shift they represent: the EU now sees itself as a security provider.

A Changing European Political Landscape

As mentioned previously, after the war in Ukraine began, European countries suddenly realized how dependent they were on Russian gas and oil. They worked hard to be free of this dependency by the end of 2022. But unlike the shock of war on the continent again, Europe’s strategic awakening to the dangers posed by its relationships with Russia was not immediate; it became one of the most divisive issues inside the EU throughout that year.¹⁷ Since the end of the Cold War, European countries’ approach to Russia had long been a point of contention, with some calling for stronger economic ties, some warning that Moscow posed an existential threat, and others insisting that Russia needed to become part of the European security architecture. Putin counted on those divisions to slow down efforts to coordinate the European response after he invaded Ukraine.

Inside the EU, German Chancellor Scholz dubbed German’s new policy the *Zeitenwende*, or a change of era, although this remains to be fully implemented.¹⁸ If Germany is Europe’s economic powerhouse, it had historically remained a dwarf when it comes to security and defense issues, putting its full trust and confidence in interdependencies in trade and energy. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has led to a new chapter being written in Germany, wherein security discussions aren’t taboo anymore, which the *Zeitenwende* embodies. France, meanwhile,

underwent a significant overhaul of its previously softer-on-Russia policy, and had to convince Central and Eastern European (CEE) partners that it had changed for good and is now of the view that, if not deterred properly, Russia could attack NATO member in years to come.¹⁹ As a consequence of its strategic awakening, the EU will continue pursuing the Europeanization of its climate, energy, and parts of its defense policy.

As the European discussion moves toward providing military supplies to Ukraine—which remains a national member state prerogative—the risk of division is back.²⁰ For instance, both far-left and far-right politicians in Bulgaria and Hungary, respectively, have begun questioning the value of sanctions against Russia.²¹ The war and its economic consequences were an integral part of the election campaigns in France and Italy in 2022.²² In August 2023, former French president Nicolas Sarkozy voiced support for Vladimir Putin and called for compromising with him—an unusual position as former French presidents generally do not comment on, much less contradict, the foreign policy decisions of the current occupant of the Elysée.²³ Sarkozy was heavily criticized for it, but these claims may become more prevalent in European debates as the war goes on. Yet strategic autonomy can be reached only if there is a unified European goal toward it. Any division on foreign and security policy—which sanctions are a part of—puts it at risk. With EU parliamentary elections coming up in June 2024 and the rise of the far-right across Europe, leaders and governments will have to clarify why European unity on defending Kyiv amidst renewed Russian attacks is essential for the futures of Ukraine and Europe.

The US Presidential Elections: Risk of Disengagement

Less than a year away from the 2024 US presidential elections, Europeans are following American debates on foreign policy very closely. In the event of Donald Trump's reelection, Europeans would be worried but not shocked. The shock already took place in November 2016 and in the months that followed, when then-President Trump referred to the EU as a "foe."²⁴ He also withdrew the US from several multilateral commitments—the Paris Climate Agreement, the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA), UNESCO—while imposing tariffs on allies and explicitly expressing skepticism of alliances which he deemed to the detriment of US interests.²⁵ Trump was also antagonistic to Europeans during the pandemic, when he fought them over vaccine access and imposed a visa ban.

During his presidency, he considered withdrawing the US from NATO, but was ultimately convinced by his advisors to stay in at the very last minute. In 2024, however, Trump's campaign platform includes a pledge "to finish the process we began under my Administration of fundamentally reevaluating NATO's purpose and NATO's mission."²⁶ At a February 2024 rally in South

Carolina, Donald Trump went so far as to say he “would encourage Putin to invade” European countries not reaching the goal of spending 2 percent of their GDP on defense.²⁷ While his comments are in line with his contempt for multilateral institutions and the EU, they mark a significant and detrimental escalation in his position.

The Biden administration’s steadfast support of NATO during the war in Ukraine stands in marked contrast to how Trump—whose fascination for authoritarian leaders such as Vladimir Putin is well-documented—would have operated.²⁸ This is precisely why Europeans, inside and outside NATO, are worried about the consequences for their own security in the event of a Trump reelection.²⁹

Now, European countries are caught in the crossfire of two seemingly contradictory goals. On one hand, while preparing for a Trump 2 scenario, they acknowledge that absent the American security guarantee, they find themselves in a state of quasi- to complete vulnerability. On the other hand, they fear that increasing their capacity to act and building their capabilities might complicate the transatlantic relationship, even under a second Biden administration, as the American side has historically been fairly resistant to Europeans building more capacity. Hence, for the Europeans to secure the American reassurance they need, they need to reassure the American side that their investments in security and defense can happen both within NATO *and* within an EU framework when they deem it necessary—

European countries are caught in the crossfire of two seemingly contradictory goals

the two not being mutually exclusive. Indeed, the Americans expect European security and defense efforts to take place solely in the NATO framework, the EU not being considered—until the war in Ukraine—a potential security provider. But the strength and credibility of NATO rests—not only, but in large part—on the American security guarantee. Hence, if the US decides to withdraw from NATO or simply to disavow it at some point, the Europeans will need to invest elsewhere.

In the other scenario where NATO remains the foundation of collective defense in Europe, more EU investments in defense will foster existing NATO commitments—especially with the addition of Sweden and Finland, both EU member states, to the military alliance.

What Does Strategic Autonomy Mean, Really?

The expression “European strategic autonomy” provokes knee-jerk reactions across Europe, and sometimes across the Atlantic too. This is all the more

surprising because European institutions have adopted the term in their official communications and conclusions. However, from a practical standpoint, the EU still has a long way to go in terms of ensuring its capacity to act. This section will examine both definitions of the term.

An Institutional Definition

European strategic autonomy is a very controversial expression, primarily because ten years after it first appeared in several official EU documents, it is still perceived as a French expression and thus denotes a French goal of achieving full independence and the capacity to act. No documents from either France or the EU, however, advocate for full autonomy, understood to mean independence of the Union when it comes to security. Even the 1994 French White Paper on Defense, which used the phrase “strategic autonomy” for the first time, makes clear that France’s capacity to act is thought to reside within France’s European and international responsibilities. In the White Paper, “strategic autonomy” is defined as “the capacity to act independently in an interdependent world.”³⁰ This phrasing is vague and subject to various interpretations. When the White Paper was released in 1994 amid the post-Cold War historical context, it seemed that the EU had achieved its main purpose, which had been to foster a peaceful environment wherein the economic interdependencies the member states had willingly imposed on each other and themselves would prevent them from ever going to war with one another again.

The expression next appears in EU documents almost 20 years later, at the December 2013 European Council meeting, where all EU member states agreed that “Europe needs a more integrated, sustainable, innovative and competitive defense technological and industrial base (EDTIB) to develop and sustain defense capabilities. This can also enhance its strategic autonomy and its ability to act with partners.”³¹ The phrasing here clarifies that European strategic autonomy was conceived of from the outset as Europe being able to contribute more to European defense efforts inside and outside of the NATO framework, and be a better partner to the transatlantic ally, as opposed to a phrase denoting any attempt to ostracize itself from others or operate autarkically.

The expression comes up again in other documents, notably in the EU’s 2016 Global Strategy, which explicitly asserts that it “nurtures the ambition of strategic autonomy for the European Union.” Strategic autonomy is thought of as enhancing the EU’s capacity to maintain peace within and outside its borders. In order to achieve this goal, the strategy asserts, the EU must forge a “sustainable, innovative and competitive European defense industry.”³² The Global Strategy has been adopted by all member states and confirms the European ambition of strategic autonomy. However, just days after the Strategy’s release, its

ability to truly shape European foreign and security policy was profoundly undermined by the decision of the UK to leave the EU. Other than France, the UK was the only nuclear weapons state in the EU, and its military and diplomatic networks also greatly contributed to Europe's capacity to act—an expression many Europeans refer to “strategic autonomy.”³³

“Strategic autonomy” is also a topic of controversy in the US. Because of the expression's perceived French associations, it is often seen as a way for France to create a wedge in the transatlantic relationship by encouraging Europeans inside and outside the EU to think about security and defense beyond the NATO framework.³⁴ This view has also been echoed by Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, whose reliance on NATO and the US security guarantee is existential and who blame France for putting ideas on the table and not following up with concrete propositions of how to bring about a new European security order. Finally acknowledging those concerns, French president Macron gave a speech in Bratislava in 2023 telling CEE countries that “We [Western Europeans] lost an opportunity to listen to you.”³⁵

In March 2022, the EU reaffirmed strategic autonomy as a goal in its Strategic Compass. The document was an update of the 2016 Global Strategy, but also an innovation in that it presented for the first time a common EU assessment of threats on the continent—a first step toward the establishment of a common strategic culture in Europe. Adopted just a month after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Strategic Compass acknowledges the strategic shock the EU was then undergoing and sets for itself the goal of enhancing “the EU's strategic autonomy and its ability to work with partners to safeguard its values and interests.”³⁶ A taboo was lifted here as the EU finally formally acknowledged that it has interests, particularly vis-a-vis security, and will use its powers—mostly economic, for now—to sustain them.

While these documents should alleviate any doubt that European strategic autonomy is a shared goal for the EU, they still don't define the path to getting there. The reasons for this are: 1) that security and defense remain largely a prerogative of the individual member states; and 2) the assumption that prevailed when the EU was formed—namely, that because it was meant as a peace project, it would focus on economic and social development, while NATO would be in charge of securing Europe.

A Practical Definition: Acting Independently in an Interdependent World

In the realm of security and defense, then, Europeans still have a long way to go to ensure their strategic autonomy. Accepting the need to invest in those capabilities—both inside and outside NATO—requires going a step further than the strategic awakening the EU has undergone since February 24, 2022. The path to a

heightened capacity to act—a less controversial way of addressing the necessity of strategic autonomy—requires Europe to be a better security provider and thus a better partner to its allies. The sections above have laid out how the EU increased its strategic autonomy in health, energy procurement, and economic power when it needed to. Building that same capacity in security and defense is indispensable and will require considerable investment. Absent that investment, European capacity to act will remain a pipe dream.

As a unique ongoing political experiment, the EU initially defined its course of action along the lines of exclusive and shared competences with its member states. It has autonomy of action in these specific, exclusive competencies: the customs union; competition rules for the single market; monetary policy for the Eurozone countries; trade and international agreements (under certain circumstances); and marine plants and animals regulated by the common fisheries policy. It has shared competencies—meaning that both the EU and member states can legislate—on the following: single market; employment and social affairs; economic, social and territorial cohesion; agriculture; fisheries; environment; consumer protection; transport; trans-European networks; energy; justice and fundamental rights; migration and home affairs; public health; research and space; development cooperation and humanitarian aid.³⁷ Notably, defense and security are nowhere on that list. In the definition and implementation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy—a very narrow definition of what the EU can do in security and defense—the Union holds special competencies. However, the promise of the European project—one of economic and social prosperity—rests on the American security guarantee.

In the case of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, American financial, material and military support (the US provided \$35 billion in security assistance) was indispensable in getting Europe to act on Ukraine—without it, the European security order would have been shattered.³⁸ It also provided the intelligence as well as political and military leadership needed to get the European response going. While the level of coordination and cooperation between the EU and NATO was unprecedented, it was still rendered possible by US support. And while the war could have been an opportunity to harness the energy and political will needed to galvanize European defense efforts—in effect, European strategic autonomy—this hasn't materialized. Weapons stockpiles are depleted, and European forces and their defense industries aren't fit for purpose. As security experts Sophia Besch and Max Bergmann put it, "Europe does not have a common defense market to meet the needs of European security." Europe's markets are scattered because they were set up to answer national demands.³⁹ US opposition

In security and defense, Europeans have a long way to go to ensure strategic autonomy

to the buildup of a comprehensive European defense industrial base transcends Democratic and Republican administrations, leading to and confirming the European dependency on the US precisely at a time when Europe cannot afford to be so dependent on the tribulations of American domestic policy.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the economic, political and geopolitical paralysis it provoked came as a reckoning moment for Europeans and fundamentally changed their perception of what their international role should be, forcing the EU to act outside of its remit in the health sector. As a result, the EU put forward policies based on solidarity and long-term investment in a fundamentally changed world, and did so much faster than it usually operates. Two years later, the rapidity with which it came to Ukraine's aid wouldn't have been possible without this previous paradigm shift in the aftermath of COVID-19. To see the advent of such a role and to be able to fulfill the responsibilities that come with it, Europe will have to invest massively in developing capacities, notably in traditional security fields that it has traditionally steered away from. Having that autonomy isn't synonymous with going it alone. Quite the contrary: it provides the opportunity to cooperate with partners and allies more productively. Absent those capacities, a geopolitical Europe will not see the light of day.

The Quest for Strategic Autonomy: Solidarity and the Nuclear Element

In the months leading up to the 2024 US presidential elections, Europeans need to realize the exceptional state they find themselves in: having relied on the

Europe must now become a power in its own right to be a better partner to the US

United States for the better part of the last 75 years, they must now build up the capabilities to become a power in their own right in order to be a better partner to the United States. Joe Biden will likely be the last transatlanticist president. Even if he is reelected in 2024, the newer generation of US foreign policy thinkers and decision-makers are shifting their attention east to the Indo-Pacific theater.⁴⁰ As it is, the American, European

and transatlantic discussions on China are having a considerable impact on the European strategic autonomy debate. China is increasingly becoming the number one foreign policy issue in the US. It is also a priority in Europe, with the EU looking for a less confrontational approach to a country it still deems a "systemic rival."⁴¹

The Europeans have developed their capacity to address economic and security challenges posed by the very interdependence they once acquired their

strength from. They will now have to defend the transatlantic alliance from internal EU qualms, as well as the reconsideration some US officials are putting it under and their ambitions to turn it into an equal partnership. Preparing for the European future starts now, and with the Herculean task of providing an answer to the following question: how can the EU make Article 42.7 of its Treaty actionable? 42.7 is the EU's solidarity clause that lays out how it deals with external threats to member states. It provides "that if a Member State is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States have an obligation to aid and assist it by all the means in their power."⁴² The article's wording makes it even more binding than NATO's Article 5 on collective defense. However, it doesn't delve into how member states should go about this defense, whether through EU institutions or inter-governmentalism.

This lack of clarity in the wording is both a risk and an opportunity. The risk is that neither the EU member states nor the Union's institutions will endorse the agenda if push comes to shove, and the emptiness of the commitment will be revealed. The opportunity resides in the possibility to formulate a European security offer, with actual capabilities, which would be brought about with EU money as well as the establishment of a European pillar inside NATO—meaning that European NATO countries, both EU and non-EU, would contribute equally to security and defense in the alliance as the US does.⁴³ Building a common defense industrial base and a stronger EU-NATO partnership are decades-long projects. Previous attempts to build a common French-German aircraft, like the Future Combat Air System (FCAS), or a future tank like the Main Ground Combat System (MGCS) have severely struggled to get off the ground. Stronger EU-NATO cooperation—in particular, for the European Defence Agency (EDA) to become the coordinating institution for defense investment and expenditure in the EU—is an absolute necessity. Russia's war in Ukraine has demonstrated the complementarity of the EU and NATO. The division of labor between the two at the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine—NATO in charge of deterrence and defense and the EU in charge of mobilizing financial tools—worked well. However, institutional rivalries—based on the obsolete idea that any investment in EU defense would weaken NATO—remain. Yet without the duplications and redundancies within the two frameworks, Europe and the US wouldn't have been in a position to provide Ukraine with the weapons it has needed until now.

Preparing for the future requires the EU to take a larger role in the definition and implementation of security needs in Europe. One indispensable step that Europe needs to take for its own sake and Ukraine's is to invest in ammunition production facilities, both inside the EU and in Ukraine. We are now in a war of attrition, wherein Russia is hoping to maintain an advantage on the ground while shelling Ukraine on a daily basis. Ukraine will need access to ammunition

to defend itself and avoid ceding territory to Russia. The military aid provided is one important step—and it should be significantly increased—but building factories in Ukraine and ensuring long-term defense investment also need to be part of the strategy to deter Russia.

Developing those production capabilities with Ukraine will also help with the reconstruction of the country once the war is over. In the past, the political will was lacking to see these projects occur, but so was the funding. In January 2024, the European Investment Fund, in conjunction with the European Commission, decided to provide €175 million to venture capital and private equity funds investing in European companies.⁴⁴ While the amount is dismal compared to the actual need, it still reflects the fact that another taboo has been lifted when it comes to shoring up European defense capabilities.

Donald Trump's contempt for NATO—and military alliances more generally—is well-known, but his latest declarations in South Carolina are a frightening

Europe should begin to envision whether and how a European nuclear deterrent might operate

escalation in his rhetoric, which make clear that Europeans cannot wait until the outcome of the 2024. In the case of a US withdrawal from NATO, critical questions would arise about who should organize European armies—should they remain under the remit of a US-less NATO, or should the EU become the organizer? But what then of the non-EU NATO member states? Other critical issues around command and control and the transfer of data would also have to be addressed immediately without a plan in hand. Relatedly,

a key component of the US security guarantee to Europe is nuclear deterrence. Hence, a step forward in this context is for Europeans to begin to envision whether and how a European nuclear deterrent might operate, thereby addressing another taboo.⁴⁵

France and the UK are the two European nuclear powers. They have undertaken unprecedented steps in their nuclear cooperation through the Lancaster House Treaty signed in 2010, effectively rendering each other “mutually dependent for a critical aspect of their nuclear deterrents,” thus demonstrating the extent of the commitment on both sides.⁴⁶ The two countries have affirmed that an attack on the vital interests of one would threaten the vital interests of the other, and therefore could be the providers of the supply-side of a Euro-deterrent. They have signaled as much in declaratory terms.

However, they now need to move on to presenting evidence of mutual cooperation and support to each other—as well as to other Europeans, both EU and non-EU countries—especially in terms of their commitment to Ukraine's

security. Only then will the rest of Europe be convinced that there is a path forward, and that it leads to a true European—and not just EU—strategic autonomy. Bringing the UK back into European security discussions, which it has effectively abandoned since Brexit, will be key to building strategic autonomy and to outlining the future of the European security order. Some will say this could only lead to a division of the alliance, others that it will be of no use since Putin won't be deterred by French and UK nuclear forces, and still others might say that it's impossible anyway. However, if Europe is serious about committing itself to Ukraine's future, it seems like a wasted opportunity to not rely on the continent's two nuclear power states and bring them together to form a nuclear umbrella above Kyiv.

Notwithstanding the results of the US 2024 elections, a Europe that takes on a larger share of its own security does not mean that the US will be left out of the project, nor should Europeans stand idly by if the US does stay critically involved. Two things can be true at the same time: Europeans and Americans have the capacity to both be present in Europe, and both be security providers. A common—European and American—acceptance of this reality would bring about strategic autonomy. Indeed, a stronger European defense would reinforce the transatlantic relationship and enable Europe and the US to cooperate on more solid—and equal—footing.

A New Chapter in Europe—and Its Defense

As the post-Cold War chapter came to a decisive end on February 24, 2022, Europe is now in the beginning pages of a new one—whose title should be “Strategic Autonomy.” When the EU increased its support to Ukraine, a question arose as to whether the reality of war on the continent had made the Union obsolete as a political peace project. The EU, which was conceived of initially as an economic project after the traumas of World War II, was formed based on the assumption that economic interdependence between former enemies would restrain them from ever going to war again. The political, economic, humanitarian and now even military role the EU is playing in supporting Ukraine, and Ukraine's own role as essential to the viability of the Union, isn't in question anymore. The EU granted candidate status to Ukraine (and Moldova) in June 2022, thus indicating that the future of the EU rests on Ukraine's victory in the war and its subsequent integration into the Union in the years to come.

However, the very foundations the EU has forged its success upon—open trade, economic interdependence, and a model that sees the US providing the greater share of traditional security and defense—are under question. In the face of a changing global environment—a revisionist Russia, an assertive

China, emerging powers looking to hedge their advantages and pursue their own interests, a growing technological divide and competition, climate change, and rising prices—the essence of the European project remains relevant and important. Although discussing matters of traditional security and defense is unfamiliar to the EU ecosystem, and there is still resistance to the concept of strategic autonomy, the urgency to develop capabilities to enable Europe’s capacity to act is more essential than ever. To be able to act—to have strategic autonomy—the EU will have to assess how to make the solidarity clause (Article 42.7) actionable, and it must also work with the UK, France and other European partners to think through what a European nuclear deterrent would look like.

As US investment and involvement in Europe is increasingly an object of domestic political debate, both in the US and within member states, Europe needs to ensure that it is contributing more to its own security. It can do so alongside the US and not hinder the US commitment to European security. The path to a strategically autonomous Europe, allied with the US, requires such an all-encompassing investment.

Notes

1. Kelly A. Grieco and Marie Jourdain, “To Strengthen NATO, the U.S. Should Embrace EU Defense,” *World Politics Review*, July 11, 2023, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/nato-europe-security-eu-strategic-autonomy-defense-us/>.
2. Ulrike Franke and Tara Varma, “Independence play: Europe’s pursuit of strategic autonomy,” European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), July 18, 2019, https://ecfr.eu/special/independence_play_europes_pursuit_of_strategic_autonomy/.
3. Aitor Hernandez-Morales, “Germany confirms that Trump tried to buy firm working on coronavirus vaccine,” *Politico*, March 15, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-confirms-that-donald-trump-tried-to-buy-firm-working-on-coronavirus-vaccine/#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20article%2C%20Trump,%E2%80%9Cfor%20the%20U.S.%20only.%E2%80%9D>.
4. “Peter Navarro on how US is fighting the spread of coronavirus,” *Fox News*, February 23, 2020, <https://www.foxnews.com/transcript/peter-navarro-on-how-us-is-fighting-the-spread-of-coronavirus>.
5. Cat Contiguglia, “Trump: EU is one of United States’ biggest foes,” *Politico*, July 15, 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-putin-russia-europe-one-of-united-states-biggest-foes/>.
6. Jonathan Hackenbroich, Jeremy Shapiro, and Tara Varma, “Health Sovereignty: How to build a resilient European response to pandemics,” European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), June 29, 2020, https://ecfr.eu/publication/health_sovereignty_how_to_build_a_resilient_european_response_to_pandemics/.
7. Mark Scott, Laura Kayali, and Laurens Cerulus, “European Commission accuses China of peddling disinformation,” *Politico*, June 10, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-commission-disinformation-china-coronavirus/>; European Center for Disease

- Prevention and Control (ECDC), "Covid-19," last consulted February 26, 2024, <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/covid-19>.
8. European Commission, "Ensuring the availability of supplies and equipment," May 2021, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/coronavirus-response/public-health/ensuring-availability-supplies-and-equipment_en#:~:text=the%20coronavirus%20pandemic-,Availability%20of%20medical%20equipment,public%20health%20and%20patient%20safety.
 9. Andreas Eisl and Mattia Tomay, "European debt mutualisation," Institut Jacques Delors, July 15, 2020, <https://institutdelors.eu/en/publications/european-debt-mutualisation-2/>.
 10. Neil Irwin, "How Germany Prevailed in the Greek Bailout," *New York Times*, June 29, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/30/world/europe/how-germany-prevailed-in-the-greek-bailout.html>.
 11. "Ukraine crisis: Biden warns Russia may invade next month," *BBC News*, January 28, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60164537>.
 12. Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard, "Fragile unity: Why Europeans are coming together on Ukraine (and what might drive them apart)," European Council on Foreign Relations, March 16, 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/fragile-unity-why-europeans-are-coming-together-on-ukraine/>.
 13. NATO Secretary General, "NATO and the EU stand with the brave people of Ukraine," February 24, 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_192397.htm.
 14. European Commission, "EU agrees 10th package of sanctions against Russia," February 25, 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_1185.
 15. European External Action Service, "The European Peace Facility," July 12, 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-peace-facility_en.
 16. European Council, "EU joint procurement of ammunition and missiles for Ukraine: Council agrees €1 billion support under the European Peace Facility," May 5, 2023, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/05/05/eu-joint-procurement-of-ammunition-and-missiles-for-ukraine-council-agrees-1-billion-support-under-the-european-peace-facility/>; European Commission, "Defence: €500 million and new measures to urgently boost EU defence industry capacities in ammunition production," May 3, 2023, https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/defence-eu500-million-and-new-measures-urgently-boost-eu-defence-industry-capacities-ammunition-2023-05-03_en.
 17. Constanze Stelzenmuller et. al, "Lessons for Ukraine," Brookings Institution, February 24, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/lessons-from-ukraine/>.
 18. Constanze Stelzenmuller, "Germany's policy shift is real but still falls short," *Financial Times*, February 13, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/cd19430d-8506-4e16-9c43-c341acc6547>.
 19. Olivier Schmitt, "Pourquoi Poutine est notre allié » (Hikari Editions, 2017), https://www.academia.edu/35107573/Pourquoi_Poutine_est_notre_Alli%C3%A9; David Cadier and Martin Quencez, "France's policy shift on Ukraine's NATO membership," *War on the Rocks*, August 10, 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/08/frances-policy-shift-on-ukraines-nato-membership/>.
 20. Emmanuel Rivière, "Comment le soutien à l'Ukraine façonne les opinions publiques européennes [How support for Ukraine shapes European Public Opinions]," *Grand Continent*, June 14, 2023, <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2023/06/14/comment-le-soutien-a-lukraine-faconne-les-opinions-publiques-europeennes/>.

21. Vessela Tcherneva, "Easy prey? Russia's influence in Bulgaria," European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), February 8, 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/article/easy-prey-russias-influence-in-bulgaria/>; Zsuzsanna Végh, "Alignment or isolation: Hungary's foreign policy after its parliamentary election," European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), March 31, 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/article/alignment-or-isolation-hungarys-foreign-policy-after-its-parliamentary-election/>.
22. Mark Leonard and Tara Varma, "How Putin's war is shaping France's election," Mark's World in 30 Minutes, March 9, 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/podcasts/episode/how-putins-war-is-shaping-frances-election/>; Hannah Roberts and Giorgio Leali, "Giorgia Meloni's Putin play," *Politico*, June 22, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/giorgia-meloni-valdimir-putin-italy/>.
23. "France's ex-president Sarkozy slammed for call to 'compromise' with Russia," *France24*, August 17, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230817-france-s-sarkozy-blasted-for-call-to-compromise-with-russia>.
24. Maegan Vasquez, "Trump calls the European Union a 'foe' of the United States," *CNN*, July 16, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/07/15/politics/donald-trump-european-union-foe/index.html>.
25. Joseph S. Nye Jr, "If Trump returns," *Project Syndicate*, May 31, 2023, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/trump-2024-election-us-foreign-policy-by-joseph-s-nye-2023-05>.
26. Donald J. Trump, "Agenda47: President Trump Issues New Video on Ukraine Policy as the Globalist Establishment Are Committed to Endless Wars," Campaign website, March 16, 2023, <https://www.donaldjtrump.com/news/9172bde9-a4e3-4024-846f-8f7fd7d06e9f>.
27. David E. Sanger, "An Outburst by Trump on NATO May Push Europe to Go It Alone," *New York Times*, February 11, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/11/world/europe/trump-nato-analysis.html>.
28. "Trump's soft spot for authoritarian leaders," *France24*, October 21, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/americas/20201021-trump-s-soft-spot-for-authoritarian-leaders>.
29. Steven Erlanger, "In Europe, Few Even Want to Talk About Trump Part 2," *New York Times*, August 19, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/19/world/europe/trump-2024-election-europe.html>.
30. The Prime Minister, "Livre Blanc sur la Defense [French White Book on Defense]," 1994, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/files/rapport/pdf/944048700.pdf>.
31. General Secretariat of the Council, "European Council conclusions," December 19 & 20, 2013, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-217-2013-INIT/en/pdf>.
32. European External Action Service, *A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*, 2016, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/global-strategy-european-unions-foreign-and-security-policy_en.
33. German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), *Building European Resilience and Capacity to Act*, December 2021, <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/building-european-resilience-and-capacity-act>.
34. Lucia Retter et. al, *European Strategic Autonomy in Defence* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2021), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1319-1.html.
35. Tara Varma, "We lost an opportunity to listen to you': Why Macron is embracing Eastern Europe," Brookings Institution, June 6, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/we-lost-an-opportunity-to-listen-to-you-why-macron-is-embracing-eastern-europe/>.

36. Council of the European Union, *A Strategic Compass for a stronger EU security and defence in the next decade*, March 2022.
37. European Commission, “Areas of EU action,” accessed February 2024, https://commission.europa.eu/about-european-commission/what-european-commission-does/law/areas-eu-action_en#:~:text=justice%20and%20fundamental%20rights,research%20and%20space.
38. Liana Fix, “U.S. Leadership on Ukraine Is Increasing European Dependence,” *World Politics Review*, February 6, 2023, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/russia-europe-war-us-ukraine-aid-nato-biden-putin/>; US Department of State, “Fact Sheet: U.S. Security Cooperation with Ukraine,” April 2023.
39. Sophia Besch and Max Bergmann, “Why European defense still depends on America,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 7, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/why-european-defense-still-depends-america>.
40. Camille Brugier and Pierre Haroche, “2027: the year of European strategic autonomy,” *Le Groupe d’Études Géopolitiques*, April 7, 2023, <https://geopolitique.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Note-de-travail-10-avril-EN-1.pdf>.
41. European Commission, “EU-China outlook,” March 12, 2019.
42. EUR-Lex, Access to the European Law, “Mutual defence clause,” accessed October 24, 2023, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/mutual-defence-clause.html>.
43. Tara Varma, “Europe and NATO are stepping up on Ukraine,” *Brookings Institution*, February 2, 2024, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/europe-and-nato-are-stepping-up-on-ukraine/>.
44. “The European Commission and the European Investment Fund join forces to boost investment in defence innovation through the Defence Equity Facility,” *European Investment Fund*, January 12, 2024, https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/european-commission-and-european-investment-fund-join-forces-boost-investment-defence-innovation-2024-01-12_en.
45. Manuel Lafont Rapnouil, Tara Varma, Nick Witney, “Eyes tight shut: European attitudes towards nuclear deterrence,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, December 19, 2018, https://ecfr.eu/special/eyes_tight_shut_european_attitudes_towards_nuclear_deterrence/.
46. Peter Ricketts, “France and the UK: A Decade of the Lancaster House Treaties,” *Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies*, November 2, 2020, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/france-and-uk-decade-lancaster-house-treaties>.