EU strategic autonomy 2013-2023
From concept to capacity

SUMMARY

EU strategic autonomy (EU-SA) refers to the capacity of the EU to act autonomously – that is, without being dependent on other countries – in strategically important policy areas. These can range from defence policy to the economy, and the capacity to uphold democratic values.

In order to structure the debate on strategic autonomy into analytical categories, this briefing assumes that by and large there have been several phases to the debate about EU-SA, each with a different focus. From 2013 to 2016, it was mainly seen as an approach to security and defence matters. From 2017 to 2019, EU-SA was considered as a way to defend European interests in a hostile geopolitical environment, marked by Brexit, the Trump Presidency and China's growing assertiveness. In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic shifted the focus to mitigating economic dependence on foreign supply chains. Since 2021, the scope of EU-SA has been widened to virtually all EU policy areas, including that of the EU's values, while the expression 'strategic autonomy' was paradoxically used less and was often replaced by similar concepts, such as 'open strategic autonomy', 'strategic sovereignty', 'capacity to act' and 'resilience'. This briefing uses 'strategic autonomy' and 'strategic sovereignty' as equal and interchangeable terms. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, steps towards achieving EU-SA are being taken, while the concept nevertheless remains blurred by the variation in terminology.

Achieving EU-SA will require a common vision, political will and capabilities to implement it, and a distinct role for the EU, between Member States and global players. Visual tools, such as the 360° strategic autonomy wheel (in Annex 1), can help to identify dependencies and understand complex interdependencies between policy areas. Political will was expressed in the European Council's Versailles Declaration of 11 March 2022, which aims at greater EU-SA in defence, energy supply and the economy. However, EU-SA can be constrained by Member States and non-EU (third) countries or international organisations that challenge the EU. This EU strategic autonomy monitor is the first in a series on the state of play in the debate and implementation of EU-SA. It will be complemented by thematic papers in the 'strategic autonomy 360°' series.

2013-2016 – Autonomy in security and defence

The basic assumption behind any debate about EU strategic autonomy is that Europe is an entity capable of taking its own decisions and determining its own future. Since the days of the EU founding fathers in the 1950s, this autonomy has increased as regards geography and competences. Geographically, 'Europe as an actor of its own' has expanded from a Community of six to the current Union of 27 states. Its competences have grown from solely economic matters to virtually all policy areas, although these are shared with the Member States and other international organisations. However, as 1950s efforts to establish a European Defence Community failed, it has taken until the 2009 Treaty of Lisbon to add substantial power in security and defence matters to the EU's competences. Some of the Member States which are also North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members did not perceive much need for a separate EU defence policy (or even saw this as a threat.
to NATO). Other Member States with a traditionally neutral status preferred to maintain their position by not engaging in a European defence system. It may therefore be surprising that the debate about EU defence policy takes on tasks which NATO or neutrality do not (sufficiently) cover, such as joint action outside EU territory or creating synergies between European armies and defence industries.

Although calls for more European autonomy in security and defence policy had been made before, for instance at the British-French Summit in Saint Malo in 1998, the first official EU document containing the expression 'strategic autonomy' appears to be the European Council conclusions on EU common security and defence policy (CSDP) of December 2013. Those describe the need for a 'European defence technological and industrial base' that can 'enhance its strategic autonomy and its ability to act with partners' [author's emphasis]. The 2016 EU Global Strategy uses the expression strategic autonomy four times, mainly in relation to security and defence. Since then, the term has occurred regularly, featuring in several sets of Council conclusions and documents (see Annex 2).

Nevertheless, the concept of EU-SA in defence matters was never fully embraced by all Member States. A 2019 commentary by the International Centre for Defence and Security in Estonia showed that the enthusiasm of the strongest promoter of the concept, France, was not shared equally by countries with a more transatlantic tradition, such as the Netherlands, or those bordering Russia, such as Finland and Estonia. The main issue that defenders of the principle of strategic autonomy faced was to explain that more European autonomy in the area of defence does not mean less cooperation between EU countries and with the United States of America (USA) within the NATO framework. In other words, that EU-SA in defence is not directed against NATO, but is instead meant as a stronger European pillar within transatlantic cooperation in NATO. Even today, some Member States still consider the concept of EU-SA in defence matters with suspicion. The EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Commission Vice-President (HR/VP) Josep Borrell has therefore been obliged to explain over and again how EU-SA should be seen as complementary to NATO (e.g. in this blogpost of December 2020).

2017-2019 – Autonomy in a shifting geopolitical context

In 2017, the first year of implementation of the Global Strategy's ambitious plans in EU security and defence, such as the European Defence Fund, the academic community mostly continued to discuss EU-SA from a critical perspective, as a paper by several international experts published by the Clingendael Institute shows. Experts expressed doubts about the concept itself and the costs it would imply. Nevertheless, in September that same year, in his speech at the Sorbonne, French President Emmanuel Macron characterised the new setting for the autonomy debate as a world in which 'nationalism, identitarianism, protectionism and isolationist sovereignism' were on the rise. This landscape was one in which the EU had been reduced by Brexit, redefining its trade and security relations with the United Kingdom (UK), and faced pressure from US protectionism and Chinese economic expansion. US President Donald Trump's adagio of 'America First' did not facilitate constructive relations with the EU, and the terms 'geopolitics' and 'geo-economics' were on the rise. Although the French President did not use the full expression 'strategic autonomy', he spoke about the need to ensure Europe's autonomous operating capabilities in defence matters and develop a shared strategic culture. His call was initially picked up in France. A 2018 article by the Institut français des relations internationales (IFRI) reflects on the possible meaning of strategic autonomy for the EU, while being aware of other countries' 'fear that France would love to commit the EU to a Gaullist turn, pushing it to sever the transatlantic link while bolstering French influence'.

In spite of these fears, the think-tank community in other countries continued to explore the EU-SA concept. A 2019 Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) paper on EU-SA still focused mainly on defence, but also dealt with EU-SA in other policy areas, such as the economy, energy supply and a strategic role for the euro as an international currency. While economic and energy policies are part of almost every analysis on EU-SA today, the role of the euro is considered a more sensitive area. The global economy is still dominated by the US dollar, and even the euro itself remains dependent on US
support. In July 2019, Giovanni Grevi published a paper for the European Policy Centre (EPC) which urged the EU to find its place in a world characterised by a US-China stand-off. It identified the economy, technology, and security and defence as the principal domains of EU-SA and stated that ‘Europeans must focus more resources on fewer priorities’. Also in July 2019, the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) published a comprehensive paper that tried to summarise the debate on EU-SA at that point in time. They characterised EU-SA as ‘one of many concepts that seek to promote a more capable, independent EU at a time of growing geopolitical competition’, while pointing to the fact that ‘EU Member States do not agree on the geographical and functional level of ambition they should adopt in pursuing strategic autonomy’. The ECFR concludes that ‘to fulfil its true potential, the EU needs to end its strategic cacophony and focus on capability building’. For this to happen, however, the EU needed (as so often in its history), another major crisis, which arrived the following year.

2020 – Covid-19 shock: Supply chain vulnerabilities

In the 2019 ECFR paper mentioned above, 16 EU Member States answered ‘no’ to the question ‘does China feature in your country’s discussion of strategic autonomy?’ These included central European countries with a special economic relationship with China (often referred to as the ‘16+1’) and countries with a strong tradition of international trade, such as Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden. One year later, most of them may have answered that question differently. The Covid-19 pandemic illustrated more strongly than ever how dependent EU countries have become on the delivery of critical products from Asia, in particular China. Whereas this dependency was first felt in the specific case of face masks, it was soon also felt in other critical areas, including medical and pharmaceutical products, semi-conductors (chips) and raw materials. Availability of many raw materials remains limited today, due to Covid-19's disruptive effects on international economic value chains. In June 2020, HR/VP Josep Borrell and European Commissioner for the Internal Market Thierry Breton published an opinion piece, making the case ‘for a united, resilient and sovereign Europe’, in which they linked the pandemic supply shortages to the need for the EU to become more resilient and independent. While the article focused on economic autonomy, it also dealt with EU-SA in the defence sector and the media.

There was much debate on EU-SA and related concepts such as resilience and the increase of ‘European capabilities’ during 2020. A study by the Austrian Foundation for Development Research, gives an overview of the effects of the pandemic on international supply chains, and identifies potential industrial sectors which could be brought back to Europe. This phenomenon, known as ‘reshoring production to Europe’ (contrary to the ‘offshoring’ of industries to low-income countries which had taken place in previous decades), was prominent for a while in the debate on EU-SA. It was suggested that a phase of ‘de-globalisation’ of the economy would set in, partly undoing the economic globalisation which had developed. However, this faded into the background when it turned out that investing in reshoring would be costly and counter the efficiency gains of the complex international value chains that had developed. Such investment should only be made in industries considered truly critical, such as pharmaceuticals and semi-conductors. Member States that had so far been reluctant regarding EU-SA then entered the debate, emphasising the need to combine an open economy with a reduction in certain dependencies. One example is the joint Spain-Netherlands non-paper on strategic autonomy while preserving an open economy. This debate resulted in the introduction of the term ‘open strategic autonomy’, destined to be a central element of the European Commission’s Trade Policy Review, published in February 2021. For the remainder of 2020, the economic debate turned to the EU’s internal economic resilience and the distribution of the costs of the pandemic and the recovery between the Member States, leading to the adoption of the €750 billion recovery fund and a set of measures known as Next Generation EU. Receiving money from the fund was made conditional on national investment in what was called the ‘twin transition’ of greening and digitalising the economy. This measure not only aimed at modernising the EU economy as a goal in itself, but also aimed at increasing the economic resilience of the EU economy against future global economic shocks, thereby strengthening EU-SA.
In September 2020, the European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) published a broad study on EU-SA, exploring the concept in many areas, such as energy supply, climate action, economic policy and the role of the euro. Whereas the study expressed doubt whether enough political will and funding would be available to implement EU-SA, it suggested using the full scope of the Lisbon Treaty before taking new policy leaps. In the same month, the European Commission presented its first strategic foresight report, 'Charting the course towards a more resilient Europe'. Although the title focuses on resilience, the document mentions EU-SA ten times, and links resilience with autonomy, stating that 'geopolitical resilience relates to Europe bolstering its 'open strategic autonomy' and 'global leadership role' (page 14).

2021 – One concept under many names

In February 2021, the Analysis and Research Team of the Council published an issues paper, 'Strategic Autonomy, Strategic Choices', which summed up the debate on EU-SA at that stage. It concluded that EU-SA is not a zero sum game, but rather a sliding scale between full autonomy and full dependency, with different results for different policy areas. It also noted that the EU is not alone in redefining its strategic autonomy: all major powers are doing something similar, such as the concepts of 'America First' and 'Buy American' in the USA, the increasing tendency to self-supportiveness in China, and the 'Make in India' strategy. Because strong political will is crucial for concrete steps towards EU-SA, the European Council tends to take a leading role in implementing it, balancing the autonomy of Member States and the EU.

The European Commission issued two important publications related to EU-SA in 2021. The first, the more technical Joint Research Centre (JRC) scenarios report from March 2021, had the term 'strategic autonomy' in its title, whereas the, more political, strategic foresight report from September that year did not. The JRC report on open strategic autonomy 2040 presented a trend analysis and four scenarios. One year later, these scenarios are mostly outdated, due to new challenges arising from the war in Ukraine and the ensuing security, energy and economic situation. The second Commission strategic foresight report of 8 September 2021 did not further define or develop the concept of EU-SA. Its title speaks of 'the EU's long-term capacity and freedom to act'. It defines four global trends and 10 'key implications', which are in fact suggestions for EU action to increase its strategic autonomy.

A (limited) discussion on the consequences of EU-SA for the promotion abroad of the EU’s values took place in 2021. At first sight, strategic autonomy is mainly about interests, rather than about values. However, on a closer look, EU-SA has often been linked to the notion of values. As early as 2016, the foreword of the Global Strategy stated that ‘the Strategy nurtures the ambition of strategic autonomy for the European Union. This is necessary to promote the common interests of our citizens, as well as our principles and values’ [author’s emphasis]. The Trade Policy Review of February 2020 also states that ‘Open strategic autonomy emphasises the EU's ability to make its own choices and shape the world around it through leadership and engagement, reflecting its strategic interests and values’ [author’s emphasis]. European Council President Charles Michel made an explicit link between EU-SA and values when speaking about the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, saying that ‘more European strategic autonomy is not only good for Europe, but also for the rest of the world because the values we uphold are the universal values of dignity and human rights’. Doubts about the EU's capacity to implement such a view were expressed by Richard Youngs of Carnegie Europe, who saw a potential 'autonomy trap', assuming that the EU’s quest for strategic autonomy through ending dependencies could also lead to a decline in the EU’s influence or leverage over the human rights or democracy situation in those countries.⁸

If we visualise the various areas to which the notion of EU-SA has been applied over the years, Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs provides a useful tool. Although a comparison between the needs of countries and those of individual people has its limits, attributing policy areas which are often linked to the discourse on EU-SA to Maslow’s hierarchical levels, shows that most EU-SA areas fall in the lower sections of the pyramid and concern basic needs and interests. For example, EU-SA can be considered to concern physiological and safety needs, when referring to EU food and water,
health and energy security, critical minerals, and military security. For Member States or the EU as a whole, ‘partnerships’ and the need for multilateral solutions could be classified under Maslow’s relational ‘Love and belonging needs’. ‘Esteem needs’ could translate as the status of the EU in the world, how it is seen by others and how it radiates its values into its surroundings. The EU is not only perceived as an economic power, it is also seen as a normative power. The EU is recognised for its core values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Ultimately, Maslow’s ‘self-actualisation’ could mean the achievement of an EU in which citizens recognise their European identity and which has realised its full autonomous policy potential.

Figure 1 – Strategic autonomy compared to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Maslow’s hierarchy of needs</th>
<th>Areas of strategic autonomy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-actualization</td>
<td>EU identity, autonomous democratic federation, global role model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esteem</td>
<td>EU as a normative power, values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love and belonging</td>
<td>EU multilateralism/partnerships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety needs</td>
<td>EU military security</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physiological needs</td>
<td>EU economic independence (supply chains)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>EU health security; EU energy security; EU food and water security</td>
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Source for Maslow pyramid: © laplateresca / Adobe Stock.

Finally, the term of EU (strategic) sovereignty is often used as an alternative for (strategic) autonomy. The July 2021 ‘European Sovereignty’ Chaillot paper by the EU Institute for Strategic Studies explores the different meanings of ‘strategic autonomy’ and ‘strategic sovereignty’. On the one hand, it suggests that ‘strategic sovereignty’ may appeal more positively to people, because it emphasises what the EU can do, whereas ‘autonomy’ emphasises independence from others. On the other hand, the paper also suggests that sovereignty may be less acceptable, because this term is related to national sovereignty, with which most people identify more than with European sovereignty.

Figure 2 – Three approaches to European sovereignty

The paper also contains a useful distinction with three ways of understanding 'autonomy':

- The EU can strive for autonomy to achieve a particular purpose, for example in its energy needs or its food supply.
- The EU can become autonomous through its capabilities, such as the EU policies, budget, or legislation needed to achieve the desired autonomy.
- The EU can be autonomous from a particular influence or country, for example the EU aims at greater autonomy by reducing its dependence on China for raw materials or on Russia for energy, while it does not aim for autonomy from the USA as regards defence.

2022 – The Ukraine shock: Translating words into action

While the academic debate on EU-SA possibly reached its peak in 2021, the shock of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine brought the debate back to hard realities and the need to react with concrete, practical action. Events unfolded fast, and both individual Member States and the EU as a whole took several decisions to increase their capacity to act and decrease dependencies on Russia. The EU not only launched several rounds of sanctions against Russia, it also agreed to the financing of weapons for Ukraine with up to €2 billion under the European Peace Facility.

A key moment in common EU action was the European Council meeting of 10-11 March 2022, which adopted the Versailles Declaration. Although the Versailles Declaration mentions 'European sovereignty' only once, in point 7, it is a remarkably robust expression of political will to achieve greater EU-SA. As regards defence, point 8 states that increased investment in defence capabilities should happen 'in a collaborative way within the EU' and 'stimulate Member States' collaborative investments in joint projects and joint procurement of defence capabilities'. The declaration also calls for greater energy independence and a 'robust economic base'. The Council decided to phase out EU dependency on Russian gas, oil and coal. The urgency has increased since Russia cut gas supplies to Poland and Bulgaria in retaliation for their refusal to pay for gas in roubles. The declaration also calls for dependencies to be reduced in the fields of critical raw materials, semiconductors, health, digital technology and food.

The European Council showed renewed unity at its meeting of 24-25 March 2022, where it endorsed the Strategic Compass for the EU’s security and defence policy to 2030. It assesses threat perceptions to the EU from various regions of the world. Although the Strategic Compass can be considered an additional tool to increase EU-SA in defence matters, HR/VP Borrell emphasised in his foreword that ‘This a Member States-owned document now adopted by the Council. Throughout the process, Member States have been in the driving seat’. While stressing that the Strategic Compass was already developed before the war in Ukraine, HR/VP Borrell also acknowledges that the ‘new sense of seriousness and strategic purpose that has taken hold in Europe’ shows the need for a ‘quantum leap forward on security and defence, similar to other big jumps we have made in European history’.

The Commission followed up on 18 May 2022, by presenting an analysis of defence investment gaps and the REPowerEU plan. The first proposes three types of measures to fill defence capability gaps: replenish stockpiles, replace Soviet-era systems and reinforce air and missile defence. The Commission also proposes an EU framework for joint defence procurement, including providing the necessary financing for this. The three core elements of the REPowerEU plan are to save energy, to diversify energy imports and to accelerate the substitution of fossil fuels with renewable energy sources. Whereas energy savings and lessening dependence on fossil fuels can increase EU-SA, the increased use of renewables or the diversification of imports can lead to new dependencies.

Developing a common vision on the EU's strategic goals

Looking ahead, it is useful to assess to what extent the EU has implemented and is likely to further apply the concept of EU-SA. Following the three approaches to EU-SA mentioned above, it is important to understand the EU’s common vision on its strategic goals (autonomy for), the
capabilities it is developing (autonomy through), and the constraints on the EU’s independence (autonomy from).

As regards a common EU vision, the European Commission is not only the initiator of legislative proposals, it is also the constant factor in the triangle of Council, Commission and Parliament that can suggest long term goals and strategies. The Commission has traditionally used ‘white papers’ and communications for this purpose, but is increasingly using strategic foresight. At the technical level, the JRC produces prospective studies, whereas at the political level, the Commission works on foresight in services under various names. In the 1990s there was a ‘cellule de prospective’, in the 2010s the ‘European Political Strategy Centre’, and currently foresight is concentrated in the Secretariat General under the supervision of Commissioner Maroš Šefčovič. The annual foresight reports produced since 2020 give the Commission’s view on the EU’s strategic goals and challenges.

The European Council sets the EU political agenda; its decisions and conclusions are therefore of a strategic nature by definition. Even though decisions are often taken in response to specific crises (financial and migration crises, the Covid-19 pandemic, Ukraine), they tend to have long-term effects that influence the overall future of the EU. The Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have been crucial in creating political momentum for the development of EU-SA. The EU Green Deal, the ‘twin transition’, the Strategic Compass and the Versailles Declaration would most likely not have been decided in their current form without these crises. As the war in Ukraine continues, the political will to implement the Versailles Declaration and thereby increase EU-SA seems strong. However, existing dependencies cannot be reduced overnight, as decision-making around limiting gas and oil imports demonstrates.

The European Parliament is not only co-legislator for most of the legislative proposals from the Commission (together with the Council), it also holds the other EU institutions to account in public debates. The European Commission President’s ‘State of the Union’ address to the European Parliament, taking stock of progress to date and presenting the Commission’s strategic vision, is a crucial moment in this respect. In her State of the Union address of September 2021, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen did not mention the term ‘strategic autonomy’. Nevertheless, she did mention investing in European tech sovereignty and defence capabilities, and announced the proposed European chips act.

Although perhaps less visible to the general public, Parliament’s services also provide academic studies on the EU’s strategic challenges, and increasingly so from a long-term perspective. Examples include Towards a more resilient Europe post-coronavirus (2021) and the annual Future Shocks report. The 360° strategic autonomy wheel in Annex 1 illustrates the interwoven nature of many policy areas in which the EU aims to achieve more strategic autonomy. It identifies six area clusters in which the EU should pay attention to critical dependencies: in geopolitics, demography (including migration), environment, the economy, information management and the EU’s values.

Developing capabilities to act more autonomously

Apart from the EU’s role as coordinator between Member States and negotiator with third countries, the EU’s institutional capabilities can be divided between its legislative and budgetary capacities. The EU has strong legislative capacity in areas related to the economy and the environment; it is no coincidence that the ‘twin transition’ of greening and digitalising the economy is an EU flagship project. The EU’s values are also strongly anchored in the Treaties and secondary legislation. However, the Member States are key to putting these laws into practice. In geopolitics, demographic policies and information management, the EU shares competences with the Member States. Where the EU has, for instance, a common migration policy, Member State cooperation is needed to implement it. The EU has competences in research, innovation and data privacy, but needs support from Member States to implement cybersecurity and has very few competences in education. As regards defence policy, competences have increased over the years, but they remain small in comparison to national competences and even to those of other international organisations such as NATO. As long as no changes to the EU Treaties are envisaged, it is unlikely that the EU will acquire
substantial additional legislative powers. However, in some policy areas, such as cooperation in foreign policy and defence – important areas for EU-SA – the EU has not yet used all of its existing powers to the full.

The EU budget can be used to invest in policy areas that are deemed essential for achieving EU-SA. The Commission has analysed expenditure under the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework (MFF) in relation to EU-SA. It notes an increase in the budget planned for EU-SA. However, this analysis is based on several assumptions about which sectors are to be considered relevant to EU-SA.\(^9\) The discussion on 'open strategic autonomy' can serve as an example where budgetary planning cannot easily assign amounts to deal with complex issues. It is easy to agree that the EU should not be too dependent on raw material imports from some countries, but diversifying imports, reducing needs and developing extraction or production capacity within the EU are cumbersome processes that require political will, long-standing executive action and more than a mere contribution from the EU budget. The €750 billion recovery fund and the 'Next Generation EU' measures are often quoted as an example of new budgetary capacity of the EU enhancing its EU-SA, as receiving the funding is conditional on investment in the twin transition and therefore contributes to aspects of EU-SA. However, the fund is not part of the regular EU budget and consists of a mix of loans and grants. As regards defence, the current Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) marks the first ever spending on the development of EU defence capability research and development, a crucial part of EU-SA, through the European Defence Fund and dedicated financing for military mobility.

Constraints to EU strategic autonomy

The EU can be viewed as an intermediate level between its Member States on the one hand and the global environment of third countries and international organisations on the other. Both can constrain the capacity of the EU to act autonomously. Member States can block or hamper attempts to boost EU-SA, because they either object to (more) EU competence in a particular area or because they prioritise national action and autonomy. When the EU is dependent on third countries for certain strategic needs, this can become a problem when these countries no longer provide the necessary materials, products or protection. Recent publications on EU-SA have mostly focused on international constraints on EU-SA, but both types of dependency should be considered.

National constraints

Member States' reservations preventing an increase in EU capacity to act lead to constraints in the field of defence policy – mainly related to fears that increased EU competence will compete with NATO competences, and constraints in the field of trade and industrial policy – mainly related to fears that EU-SA will hamper free trade and free competition. While the latter has been alleviated by the introduction of the term 'open strategic autonomy', the former is gradually being overcome with progress on EU-NATO cooperation.

Apart from resistance to wider EU competences, national constraints to EU-SA can also take the form of 'collateral damage' caused by national action that does not sufficiently take account of the European dimension. Such limits are not necessarily intended to restrict the EU’s capacity to act, but have this effect in practice. An interesting example is the sudden policy changes that took place in Germany after the start of the war in Ukraine. Within a couple of weeks, the country fundamentally changed both its energy and its defence policy.\(^{10}\) Germany refused to license Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline operations and signed gas import contracts with countries other than Russia. Whereas some experts considered stopping Nord Stream 2 a long-overdue correction of a German 'Alleingang', and in that sense possibly in line with EU-SA, the hasty decisions on alternative gas imports were not really made under a European strategy. As a recent ECFR commentary noted, a coordinated diplomatic effort will be necessary to make the REPowerEU plan work. Member States concluding partnerships with third countries should coordinate with other Member States rather than compete against each other. The German defence policy change included setting up a
€100 billion investment fund for revamping the *Bundeswehr* and the decision to buy American F35 fighter jets. This latter certainly compensated for a loss of ‘German strategic autonomy’, but it remains to be seen whether it will serve the Versailles agenda commitment to 'stimulate collaborative investments in joint projects and joint procurement of defence capabilities'.

On the other hand, actions to reduce national dependencies can support European autonomy indirectly. If a Member State reduces its dependence on Russian oil or Chinese solar panels for example, this also decreases the EU’s dependency on these products and resources, and increases EU-SA. National sovereignty and EU sovereignty is therefore not a zero sum game. The June 2022 ECFR European Sovereignty Index quantifies Member States’ contribution to European sovereignty in six fields: climate, defence, economy, health, migration and technology. One of the findings of this research is that north-western EU countries are contributing more to EU-SA than central and eastern EU countries. Somewhat paradoxically, staunch supporters of free trade, such as Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands, combine a critical attitude towards the concept of EU-SA with a high degree of economic independence and thereby de facto leadership on EU-SA.

### International constraints

International constraints to EU-SA mostly take the form of dependencies on third countries that increase EU vulnerability and limit its capacity to act. The debate first focused on economic dependencies, mainly on Asian countries, regarding raw materials and semi-conductors. In May 2021, the Commission published an update to its 2020 industrial strategy outlining the dependencies of the EU on products and technologies from third countries. The debate is currently more focused on independence from Russian energy resources. Whether supply chain interruptions occur due to unforeseen circumstances (such as Covid-19) or part of a third-country strategy to create dependencies (China’s Belt and Road projects or Russia’s energy delivery policy), is of limited relevance to EU-SA, as its mere existence limits the EU's capacity to act autonomously. Nevertheless, dependencies are usually only experienced as problematic once an interruption in delivery occurs or relations with a third country turn sour.

In this respect it is illustrative that the high dependence of most EU countries on the USA for their (self) defence was briefly considered problematic during the Trump Presidency, whereas these concerns faded as soon as Joe Biden became US President. Whatever the politics of individual governments or politicians, from the EU-SA viewpoint, a more consistent approach would be desirable (see HR/VP Borrell’s comments that EU-SA in defence policy is complementary rather than in competition to NATO). In a recent article, the HR/VP noted that 'hesitations to move ahead on this agenda “because of NATO” come from inside the EU, not the US’ – quoting US Secretary of State Antony Blinken that the USA wants ‘a stronger and more capable European defence that contributes to global and transatlantic security’. Nevertheless, such US statements mostly appear to refer to increased EU spending on defence, not to the development of an EU defence industry competing with US firms.

### Russia's war against Ukraine

A combination of national and international constraints on EU-SA in defence policy may emerge as a result of the current war in Ukraine. In the short term, the war appears to be mainly encouraging EU Member States to reflect on their own national security and the importance of collective self-defence within NATO. Tectonic shifts in security policy are taking place in Finland, Germany and Sweden. This could distract attention – and some fear perhaps also budgetary means – from European projects that are not directly related to the Ukraine crisis. In a negative scenario, the projected 5 000 troops expected to form an ‘EU Rapid Deployment Capacity’ (an EU Strategic Compass flagship component) – could be delayed, or simply not materialise, in the face of more acute defence spending needs.

Whereas the EU is coping with the multiple consequences of the war in Ukraine, the expert community tries to include these new developments in the concept of EU-SA. In April 2022, SWP published the paper ‘Rethinking strategic sovereignty’, which notes that in the new confrontational
security order, the EU's strategic sovereignty is on the one hand becoming a more significant goal for the EU, while on the other its strategic dependence on the US is likely to grow.

However, in the long term, the increased awareness of the importance of security and defence could also lead to a reinforced European defence pillar and ultimately increase EU-SA.

ENDNOTES

1 For historic information on the development of the European Community and the European Union see for instance: https://www.cvce.eu/en/home

2 Point 2 of the Saint Malo Declaration states that ‘the Union must have the capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces, the means to decide to use them, and a readiness to do so, in order to respond to international crises’ [author's emphasis].

3 The foreword states in a general sense that strategic autonomy is 'necessary to promote the common interests of our citizens, as well as our principles and values'. Strategic autonomy is further mentioned on pages 9 and 22 as a precondition for Europe’s ability to promote peace and security. Page 49 states that a 'sustainable, innovative and competitive European defence industry is essential for Europe’s strategic autonomy and for a credible CSDP’.

4 For the economic situation of the period and the rise of the term ‘geo-economics’, see: M. Damen, W. Igler, Free trade or geo-economics, trends in world trade, Policy Department for External Relations, European Parliament, September 2019.

5 Illustrated by the following quote: ‘To this day the European financial system remains heavily dependent on the United States and on decisions of the US Federal Reserve (Fed). In fact Washington expanded its position as financial hegemon during the global financial crisis. The dollar liquidity the Fed granted the ECB between 2007 and 2010 (central bank swap arrangements) can be compared to the military security guarantee in the NATO context. Without this support the EU's financial system would have collapsed’, B. Lippert, N. Onderza, V. Perthes (eds.), European Strategic Autonomy – actors, issues, conflicts of interests, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Research Paper 4, March 2019

6 See also EPRS briefing ‘Resilience of global supply chains – challenges and solutions’ of 2021

7 National recovery plans had to prove a minimum of 37% of expenditure in climate investments and 20% in digital transition. According to the Commission scoreboard, these targets were largely met.

8 For more information on strategic autonomy in relation to the EU’s values, see: M. Damen M., Values on the retreat? The role of values in the EU’s external policies, Policy Department for External Relations, European Parliament, March 2022.

9 See: EU Strategic Autonomy and the role of the EU budget, EU Budget Policy Brief #2, April 2022. It is assumed that only expenditure on defence, space, research and development, digital investments, diplomacy, energy and healthcare counts as EU-SA related. Under that assumption, the biggest increases in expenditure are planned in defence, healthcare and digital policy.


11 Germany opted for the F35 because it was ‘available off the shelf’, facilitated cooperation with NATO countries and could carry NATO’s nuclear missiles. To mitigate French fears that the choice of the F35 threatens the development of the Eurofighter (the Future Combat Air System FCAS) – a genuine European project – Germany is likely to invest in both projects. See: ‘F 35: why Germany is opting for the US-made stealth fighter jet’, DW, 16 March 2022.

12 Commission Staff Working Document SWD(2021) 352 final

13 J. Borrell, Europe in the interregnum: our geopolitical awakening after Ukraine, Groupe d'études politiques, 24 March 2022.

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Annex 1

The 360° strategic autonomy wheel – A visual support

The wheel illustrates policy areas in which the EU aims at more strategic autonomy, as well as the links between them. Mutual influence between policy areas can happen across the wheel, but is particularly strong in adjacent areas. Military action for example can cause migration, health is linked to food quality, energy policy influences the climate and misinformation undermines democracy. The wheel can help to understand links, set priorities and view potential conflicts. More autonomy in the digital green economy will, for example, require vast quantities of ‘rare earth’ materials, making the EU more (instead of less) dependent on imports. Reductions in energy consumption achieved through digitalisation of the economy (for example by reducing transport) will be partly offset by the increase of energy consumption by electronic devices and data centres. The wheel cannot solve such dilemmas, but can help to identify such relationships.
Annex 2

European Council and Council mentions of 'strategic autonomy'

Overview by Kjeld van Wieringen, Strategic Foresight and Capabilities Unit, EPRS, 2021

As of May 2021, a total of five sets of European Council conclusions had mentioned strategic autonomy. It was first included a single time in 2013, where it related to a discussion on Europe’s defence industry. In 2018, strategic autonomy was again mentioned in conclusions of two European Council meetings, again related to security and defence (See: 1; 2). In 2020, another two sets of conclusions included strategic autonomy, one referring to the European Defence Fund and one to the Covid-19 recovery package including its related green transition and digital transformation pillars (See: 3; 4).

European Council President Charles Michel mentioned European strategic autonomy in several speeches in 2020 and 2021, referring to strategic autonomy as 'our new common project for this century' as well as 'the aim for our generation'. He has also discussed strategic autonomy in reference to access to critical resources, such as medical products, rare earths and microprocessors, as well to the space sector and digital sovereignty (See: 5; 6; 7). In December 2020, upon completion of the first year of his presidency, he stated that strategic autonomy of Europe is a key issue and that 'We must act in order to be less dependent, more resilient, and more influential'.

The Council has produced many additional conclusions and other official documents mentioning strategic autonomy. Regarding security, defence and foreign policy, Council documents from 2013 onwards support the enhancement of European strategic autonomy through the European defence technological and industrial base (EDTIB) (See: 8; 9; 10; 11; 12; 13; 14), CSDP (See: 15; 16; 17), European defence industry development (See: 18; 19; 20; 21), the EU’s Global Strategy for security and defence (See: 22; 23; 24), the European Defence Agency (See: 24; 25), EU capacity as a security provider, the EU Maritime Security Strategy, the establishment of a European Defence Fund, and the EU’s strategy for and engagement with the Indo-Pacific.

In its conclusions and documents from 2015 onwards, the Council also stressed the importance of digital sovereignty and cybersecurity against threats in the digital domain for strategic autonomy (See: 26; 27; 28; 29; 30; 31; 32). In 2020, the Council furthermore started to emphasise the need to enhance strategic autonomy through technological innovation (See: 33; 34; 35; 36; 37; 38). Space was mentioned from 2017 onwards, with the Council suggesting that strategic autonomy should be enhanced in the fields of the EU space programme, space surveillance capabilities, and control over satellite navigation (See: 39; 40). A final issue concerns resources, with the Council proposing that strategic autonomy should be improved through strong and diversified value chains (See: 41; 42), industrial competitiveness (See: 43; 44), and access to critical medicinal products. Strategic autonomy featured as one of the three central items discussed during the Foreign Affairs Council meeting of December 2020.