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THE IMPACT OF THE UKRAINE CONFLICT ON THE EUROPEAN UNION'S ASPIRATIONS FOR STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

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Abstract

The European Union aspires to become one of the world's leading strategic powers, and from that position to pursue objectives like: stability, ability to set standards, or advancement of its own values (Charles Michel). The EU began a process of combining its relevant policies and instruments in response to heightened awareness of security challenges in its region and a turbulent worldwide climate. The underlying idea has been to strengthen the EU's ability to act, with the goal of achieving a higher level of strategic autonomy. Nevertheless, the war in Ukraine has increasingly exposed the limits of these ambitions. The EU's current challenges in its Eastern Neighborhood will force it to go beyond its current crisis management and conflict resolution tools, which have allowed it to deal with unresolved conflicts and hybrid threats and move forward to become capable of defending and promoting its own interests, as well as enhancing its credibility as a strong foreign policy actor. The aim of this contribution is to assess the concept of strategic autonomy of the European Union to expound the imbalance between the growing expectations for a stronger EU political role on the international stage and the limited opportunities available to the EU to meet these challenges. It seeks to analyze the objectives, limitations, and prospects of the EU's ambitions in an international context marked by growing tension and instability.

Keywords: *strategic autonomy, capability/expectation gap, European Union, Eastern Neighborhood*

On the World Day of Peace at the beginning of the previous year, Pope Francis warned that "despite numerous efforts aimed at constructive dialogue between nations, the deafening noise of war and conflict is intensifying" (Pope Francis, 2022). After a month and a half, his warnings began to materialize in ways that most believed were inconceivable in twenty-first-century Europe. It was just the beginning of yet another in a long series of crises that have tested the European Union's capacity to manage difficult situations and strengthen its own governance system in response to crises that are becoming increasingly complex. In the past two decades, the EU has experienced the financial crisis, the euro crisis, the Greek crisis, the Syrian crisis, the migration crisis, the Crimean crisis, the Ukrainian crisis, the Brexit crisis, the Catalan crisis, and the rule of law crisis. All these crises have disrupted many people's faith in the European Union's ability to respond appropriately to the challenges it faces,

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prompting some scholars to question whether we are witnessing a transition "from EU crisis governance to EU governance crisis." (Börzel, 2016).

However, it was the conflict in Ukraine that most painfully revealed the EU's limited ability to act. By the time the conflict broke out, the EU had already begun combining its relevant policies and instruments to achieve a higher level of strategic autonomy in response to a heightened awareness of security threats in its region and a turbulent global climate. The EU's current challenges in its Eastern Neighborhood will force it to go beyond its current crisis management and conflict resolution tools, which have allowed it to deal with unresolved conflicts and hybrid threats, to become capable of defending and promoting its own interests and enhancing its credibility as a powerful foreign policy actor.

The primary objective of this contribution is to demonstrate how the concept of strategic autonomy is enduring new adaptations considering recent events. This topic is part of a larger research endeavor whose objective is to reveal the many facets of the EU's strategic autonomy ambitions. Due to the constraints imposed, this paper will primarily offer a glimpse of how, against the backdrop of the numerous crises to which the European Union has been exposed and a perceivably perilous international climate, the European Union has become increasingly preoccupied with how it can become more resilient, more robust, more capable of acting, and, why not, more autonomous. It will begin with a comprehensive discussion of the concept of strategic autonomy and a summary of some of the factors that have influenced the EU's aspirations in this regard to date. Then, to address the research objectives, the analysis will concentrate on the characteristics of strategic autonomy that have become especially relevant in the context of the Ukrainian conflict. It will then outline several trends, challenges, and expectations for the European Union. Lastly, a concise conclusion section will close the discussion.

1. EU's ambition for a higher level of strategic autonomy

Strategic autonomy of Europe has been a focal point in the discourse on European policy. The notion of Europe's "self-assertion" ("*Selbstbehauptung Europas*", Helmut Schmidt) has been a central aspect of the European political discourse since at least the founding of the EU with its Common Foreign and Security Policy. This principle has been in one way or another at the heart of the EU Common Security and Defense Policy since its inception. It has slowly made its way onto the EU agenda since 2013 in close connection with discussions on creating a genuine European defense industry.

Although it was explicitly mentioned only in the *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. EU Global Strategy* developed by the European External Action Service under the guidance of the former High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini in 2016. In the opinion of Federica Mogherini, the

principle of strategic autonomy was seen as an essential prerequisite for the promotion of European principles and values, peace, and security across European borders. All in all, in the entire document there are five explicit references to the principle of strategic autonomy, which is established as an "ambition of the Global Strategy" (EEAS, 2016: 7), "necessary to promote the common interests of our citizens, as well as our principles and values" (EEAS, 2016: 7), "important for Europe's ability to promote peace and security within and beyond its borders" (EEAS, 2016: 12, 22), and an important ingredient for a "sustainable, innovative and competitive European defense industry" (EEAS, 2016: 48). Nevertheless, as we can notice, the precise contours of the concept were not provided. These general ideas on the strategic autonomy of the European Union were to be complemented by a Roadmap that would consider different public policy options. Unfortunately, Federica Mogherini failed during her term to advance in the direction of generating a Roadmap.

As the European Union was adversely affected by multiple crises between 2016 and 2020 (Brexit, the erratic Trump presidency, the rise of populist parties and movements, and the rule of law), concerns for a more strategic and decisive conception of the EU's role on the international stage gradually rose to the forefront. It is to Macron's credit that he put strategic autonomy on the EU agenda at the start of his first term as French leader, with a speech at Sorbonne University in September 2017. In his view, the idea of strategic autonomy had the potential to breathe new life into the European integration project and could be the solution to strengthening the EU's position in the world.

Federica Mogherini's legacy, enriched by the ideas floated in response to the adverse situations that exposed a few of EU's vulnerabilities, were brought forward by Charles Michel in his capacity of president of the European Council, in a speech to a distinguished audience at the Bruegel think-tank in Brussels. He acknowledged Mogherini's contribution to the discussion, although her "strategic leadership in this area has not yet been fully appreciated." According to Michel, Europe is already one of the "world's leading strategic powers", and from that position the EU will have to pursue three objectives: stability, the ability to set standards, and the advancement of its own values. In his view, "effective strategic autonomy is the credo that brings us together to define our destiny, and to have a positive impact on the world." As such, strategic autonomy must pursue three objectives: 1/. stability – by this meaning physical security, environmental security, economic security (also securing supply of critical resources), social security; 2/. disseminating EU's standards (for taking the lead in different fields), and 3/. promoting EU's values for increasing legitimacy (Michel, 2020).

To better organize the next two sections of this analysis, we will summarize Charles Michel's understanding of strategic autonomy by considering the two dimensions highlighted by Daniel Fiott, Security and Defense Editor at the EU

Institute for Security Studies (EUISS): the freedom to act and the freedom from dependence. In practice, each of the following sections will be organized along these two axes, tracing how, on the one hand, some intrinsic challenges to the idea of strategic autonomy and, on the other, events in the eastern part of the continent have come to shape it. As it will be demonstrated, these two enablers of the idea of enriching the EU's sense of strategic autonomy rely both on strengthening EU's freedom of action and, at the same time, its capacity to limit its external dependence. So, the goal of the next section of the present analysis would be to showcase the EU's future challenges and expectations in terms of strategic autonomy.

2. Current challenges and expectations

The EU's conception of its strategic autonomy is still far from having a unified understanding, and the literature goes so far as to recommend that the contours of this concept be left deliberately loose (Fiott, 2022: 17). It is often used in the sense of strategic sovereignty (Fiott, 2021), as President Macron did in his Sorbonne speech mentioned above (Macron, 2017). While initially strategic autonomy was closely linked to the fields of security and defense and referred to the transformation of the EU into a global actor capable of taking on complex missions to maintain international peace and security and to ensure its own security, it gradually became clear that without the building of a European defense system and the creation of a genuine European defense industry it is difficult to consider such an aspiration (Damen, 2022: 1-2).

Unquestionably, President Macron is credited with giving a decisive push for a considerable expansion of the understanding of strategic autonomy. In the Sorbonne speech, he evoked six areas of strategic autonomy: security, borders and migration, foreign policy, the ecological transition, digital technology, and monetary and economic power. Other European leaders have since proposed their own interpretations of "European sovereignty" and contributed as such to its expansion. For instance, together with the prime ministers of Denmark, Finland, and Estonia, Angela Merkel called for "digital sovereignty" (Merkel *et al*, 2021).

Further on, as COVID-19's disruption of global supply chains revealed the European Union's unsettling dependence on third countries, the European Commission pledged to pursue an open strategic autonomy that balances Europe's need for supply resilience with promoting multilateral, free, and value-added trade (European Commission, 2021a). Under Ursula von der Leyen's presidency, the European Commission has undertaken to strengthen the EU's geopolitical position. In the past few years, strategic autonomy has gained particular significance in the context of its expansion across of the various public policy areas of the European Union such as internal market, environment, digital communications, public health, trade, but not least defense and security.

Despite having benefited from favorable circumstances that have fostered its development, the concept of strategic autonomy still faces several difficulties. Different interpretations of its substance are the most prominent among them. For instance, important member states such as France and Germany tend to place different emphasis on the essence of strategic autonomy.

Strategic autonomy has been and remains both a central part of the French idea for the future of Europe and French President Emanuel Macron's pet project. Despite having contributed to the expansion of the idea of EU strategic autonomy, France continues to show a preference for prioritizing the deepening of the European security and defense integration. Without directly contradicting the French concept of European strategic autonomy, Germany believes this should allude to Europe's ability to ”actively shape” its immediate neighborhood and the world order. This implies that it cannot be limited strictly to security and defense issues but must be understood in a much broader sense as a politically coordinated approach that extends to all areas of public policy with an external dimension (trade, development policy, etc.).

In this context, it is crucial to observe that the German conception of strategic autonomy is more nuanced than the French, as evidenced by the heated exchange between the French president and the German defense minister in November 2020. While agreeing that Europe needs a ”well-coordinated foreign, security and defense, trade and development policy” to ”play a bigger role in world politics,” according to the German defense minister, any discussion on this topic must begin by accepting the reality of Europe's reliance on the United States in terms of defense since 75% of EU’s capabilities, 70% of its strategic enablers (reconnaissance, satellite communications, helicopters, aerial refueling systems, etc.) are provided by the United States (Kramp-Karrenbauer, 2020). From Germany's perspective, it would take decades to eliminate this dependency. However, the prevailing view is that Europe cannot decouple from the United States under any circumstances (Steinmeier, 2020). In addition, for the United States to maintain its commitment to the continents' security, Europe must strive ”to stand shoulder to shoulder with the United States as a strong partner, not as a helpless child” (Kramp-Karrenbauer, 2020). These positions reflect the profoundly held beliefs of German policymakers (Roos, 2010: 321-323), and it is anticipated that they will persist in the future.

Another sensitive issue is how the EU's freedom to act and its freedom to reduce dependencies are conceptualized. In this regard, we will only provide a few examples that we believe are representative of the current research. The purpose of the following section will be to demonstrate how the EU's efforts to strengthen its strategic autonomy have taken on a new significance in light of the conflict in its immediate vicinity.

3. Adaptations of the idea of strategic autonomy in response to the challenges in the neighborhood

The EU's efforts to increase strategic autonomy have taken on additional relevance in light of the war in its immediate region. The war in Ukraine has placed the EU on a path to increase its freedom of action and ability to reduce external dependency, both of which are critical prerequisites for playing a more proactive regional role.

In contrast to its previous, primarily bureaucratic approach to its neighboring countries, the EU has demonstrated its ability and resolve to mobilize all of the tools at its disposal, from diplomacy to sanctions, military assistance to humanitarian aid: it imposed severe sanctions on Russian financial and media institutions, took decisive steps to replace Russian energy imports, and activated the European Peace Facility to support Ukraine, offering €6.5 billion up to now and pondering about creating under the same scheme a Ukrainian Defense Fund that will be fueled with €20 billion over the next four years (Brzozowski, 2023). It adopted a temporary protection scheme for people fleeing Ukraine.

EU's freedom to act was put to the test in various ways as soon as the war in Ukraine started. The situation that arose after President Zelenskyy, the prime minister, and the speaker of the Ukrainian parliament signed a formal application to join the European Union on February 28 is illustrative in this respect. From a constantly shifting possibility, Ukraine's accession to the EU became one of the very few factors capable of advancing the conflict's resolution in some way. On the one hand, Russia has not appeared to be enraged by the perspective of an EU membership for Ukraine. Moscow never brought up EU enlargement in its pre-war rhetoric or claimed that the EU posed a security danger to Moscow. On the other hand, as numerous European officials have correctly noted, a Ukrainian EU membership has been regarded difficult for both political and technical reasons. Prior to the conflict, many questioned the European future of the EU's neighbors, who were marginalized by enlargement fatigue and other political, economic, and social factors. It is true that against the background of the current situation Ukraine, like Moldova for that matter, was granted EU candidate country status in record time. However, the accession process is characterized by its breadth and complexity, necessitating the harmonization of numerous elements, such as legislative measures and technical standards. According to the most optimistic assessments of Ukrainian politicians and diplomats, the accession process is projected to take many years, even if accelerated procedures are utilized. Moreover, Ukraine's level of preparedness for EU membership remains largely unchanged in the aftermath of the war.

The context created by the war in Ukraine has substantially bolstered the EU's capacity to mobilize for sanctions and to engage in the promotion of its own values, albeit with rather mixed results thus far. It has also prompted a number of European

leaders to reconsider the strategic autonomy of the EU. For instance, in an extensive interview following his return from a trip to People's Republic of China in early April 2023, President Macron cautioned that Europe must avoid becoming an "American follower" and being drawn into "conflicts that do not belong to it." Additionally, he advocated for the EU to become the third pole of power in international relations (Macron, 2023). Moreover, on Europe Day 2022, he introduced a proposal for a European Political Community, which would unite EU and non-EU members who share a concern for the security of the European continent (Macron, 2022).

The conflict in Ukraine heightened the EU's most pressing concerns regarding its independence from dependencies. The Versailles Declaration adopted by the European Council on March 10-11, 2022, in the immediate aftermath of the outbreak of war, emphasized the need to reduce the EU's reliance on Russia and to defend European societies against Russian interference through disinformation and cyber attacks. It referred unequivocally to investing in combined projects and joint procurement programs to support defense capabilities, reducing energy dependence on Russian gas, oil, and coal, and reducing dependence on critical raw materials, semiconductors, digital technology, etc. (European Council, 2022). In fact, it was a continuation of steps started with the formal request made by the European Council, on behalf of the Member States, to the European Commission to identify "strategic dependencies, particularly in the most sensitive industrial ecosystems such as for health, and to propose measures to reduce these dependencies, including by diversifying production and supply chains, ensuring strategic stockpiling, as well as fostering production and investment in Europe"(European Council, 2020). Since 2021, the European Commission has been consistently undertaking comprehensive assessments of the strategic dependencies of the European Union. The initial analysis has identified a total of 137 items that were intricately linked to delicate ecosystems and exhibited a significant reliance on suppliers from foreign countries. Furthermore, the research provided an initial phase of comprehensive evaluations for six key domains in which the European Union encounters interdependencies (European Commission, 2021b). These domains included raw materials, batteries, active medicinal ingredients, clean hydrogen, semiconductors, as well as cloud and edge technologies. In 2022, a subsequent analysis was conducted, which specifically examined five key domains: rare earths and magnesium, chemicals, solar panels, cybersecurity, and IT software. The Commission's report sought to improve understanding of the dangers and opportunities associated with strategic dependencies on third states in the European context (European Commission, 2022).

In summarizing the findings from this part of the analysis, it can be inferred that the initiation of conflict in Ukraine presented the European Union with a significant challenge and an equally significant chance to advance its strategic autonomy along its two guiding axes.

Conclusions

The conflict in Ukraine has effectively highlighted the vulnerabilities of the European Union's pursuit of strategic autonomy and its aspirations to assume a prominent role in global politics. The entity faced significant problems across various domains, ranging from its freedom to act to its ability to decrease its reliance on external factors. Indeed, it is accurate to assert that the European Union (EU) has implemented measures to address these various issues, which would have been arduous to envision under ordinary conditions. Nevertheless, the European Union (EU) has yet to achieve complete strategic autonomy and fully capitalize on the prospects it presents.

The consideration of the global context is crucial for the European Union's strategic autonomy. At a conference held at the Faculty of European Studies in Cluj in 2022, Jim Cloos, former Deputy Director General for General and Institutional Policy at the General Secretariat of the EU Council of Ministers, drew attention to the need for EU to have a more comprehensive understanding of the world as a whole. As a global participant, the EU must accept the global community as it is, not as it should be. It is true that the EU takes pride in defending values and should continue to do so, but it must also recognize that not everyone shares these values, particularly in a world characterized by great power competition.

In order to attain the objective of strategic autonomy, it will be imperative for the EU to enhance its freedom to act and its freedom from dependencies. This will require the European Union to establish a significant level of internal coherence. Otherwise, the sensitive statements made by Pope Francis at the beginning of 2022 that "[t]he diminished effectiveness of many international organizations is due to their members entertaining differing visions of the ends they wish to pursue" (Pope Francis, 2022) may materialize, similar to the warnings on the potential outbreak of war that, as previously noted in the start of this analysis, were dismissed as implausible in 21st century Europe.

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