

Policy Brief

Time to go beyond the meta-debate on EU strategic autonomy in defence

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Dr. Nicole Koenig, Deputy Director

#Strategicautonomy
#EUdefence
#Biden

EU member states have been debating the notion of European strategic autonomy in the field of defence for decades. The election of US President Donald Trump in 2016 revived this debate and his administration's negative attitude towards EU defence cooperation initiatives rendered it highly emotive. With Joe Biden's victory, the debate is apparently ready to enter the next stage. In this policy brief, I argue that a Biden administration represents an opportunity to go beyond terminological debates onto two more substantial questions that represent two sides of the same coin: how can Europeans shape a more balanced transatlantic security and defence agenda and how can they defend their own security interests?

Introduction: A long-standing and broadening debate

European Council President Charles Michel [called](#) European strategic autonomy “the aim of our generation”. This ambition is contested among EU member states. One problem is that they often start from different definitions. As EU High Representative [Josep Borrell](#) explains, there is the broad and [global meaning](#) that Michel uses, which includes the economic amongst others and implies autonomy from a wide range of actors. In this broader context, strategic autonomy is often used interchangeably with ‘strategic sovereignty’. The narrower meaning focuses on security and defence and is usually associated with independence from the US. Both meanings are controversial, but for different reasons.

This policy brief focuses on the narrower meaning. While concepts such as ‘open strategic autonomy’ in trade are still quite new, the debate about strategic autonomy in defence has been going on for decades. How far Europe should be able to defend itself independently of the US or NATO was already a defining factor behind the notion of European Defence Community, which was tabled and later rejected by the French in the 1950s. In their [St. Malo Declaration](#) of 1998, marking the birth of the European, later Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), the UK and France were explicit: “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.” Set out against the backdrop of Europe’s failure to respond to the Yugoslav civil wars, it was clearly about autonomy from the US, and by extension NATO.

This was controversial within the EU itself due to the divide between Atlanticist and Europeanist member states but also across the Atlantic. In 1999, then US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright famously pronounced the three Ds: she warned that Europe’s new security and defence policy should not amount to decoupling, duplication or discrimination against non-EU allies. These warnings gradually faded as burden-sharing became the dominant transatlantic security narrative. Barack Obama actively encouraged Europeans to cooperate more on defence, not least to allow them to shoulder a greater share of the burden.

Despite simmering tensions between Europeanist and Atlanticist member states, “strategic autonomy” began appearing as an objective in official EU defence-related documents from [2013](#) onwards. The EU [Global Strategy](#) of June 2016 went a step further and made a key ambition of the bloc’s foreign and security policy.

1. How Trump stirred the debate

The real controversy surrounding the term only flared up after the election of Donald Trump in November 2016. He called NATO ‘obsolete’, questioned Article 5 and warned that he would withdraw the US from NATO if European Allies failed to spend more on defence. He also intertwined defence and trade issues, exemplified by the imposition of heavy tariffs on European aluminium and steel due to “national security concerns”.

His transactional and unilateral approach was a driver behind strategic autonomy. In May 2017, Chancellor Angela Merkel declared that the “times in which we could completely rely on others have somewhat passed” and urged Europeans to take their fate into their own hands. In 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron became the most vocal proponent of European strategic autonomy. In his ground-breaking [Sorbonne speech](#) he said: “In the area of defence, our aim needs to be ensuring Europe’s autonomous operating capabilities, in complement to NATO. The basis for this autonomy has been laid, with historic progress in recent months.” He referred to the launch of the EU’s capability development initiatives – Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF) – as foundations of “Defence Europe”.

The Trump administration torpedoed these very foundations. His administration criticised PESCO and the EDF as duplicative of NATO and portrayed them as vehicles of protectionism. Europeans rejected this interpretation and accused the US of a “Buy American and sell anywhere” policy. In a letter to then EU High Representative Federica Mogherini in May 2019, the US government [warned](#) that restrictions on third country participation amounted to “poison pills” that could lead to retaliatory action.

The administration’s attacks on the EU’s defence initiatives were divisive. Warnings against duplication resonated with Central and Eastern Europeans wary of the French-inspired notion of strategic autonomy and eager to strike bilateral defence deals with the US. The debate on third country participation in the EDF and PESCO also divided Europeans into two camps: one led by [Northern](#) and Eastern members with close defence industrial ties to the US or UK which advocated an open approach and another, led by France, in favour of a restrictive approach.

2. Biden and the next round of the debate

With Biden’s victory, the debate on strategic autonomy has entered the next stage. German Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer kick-started it with an opinion piece for [POLITICO](#) the day before the US elections calling strategic autonomy an “illusion” that should come to an end. Macron responded in a separate [interview](#) voicing

his profound disagreement. He called her rejection of strategic autonomy a “historical misinterpretation” and suggested that Merkel’s opinion differed. Unsurprisingly, the Polish Defence Minister then sided with Kramp-Karrenbauer (see overview below).

The debate at a glance

Politician	Date and outlet	Statement related to strategic autonomy/sovereignty
German Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer	POLITICO 2 November 2020	“Illusions of European strategic autonomy must come to an end: Europeans will not be able to replace America’s crucial role as a security provider. For the U.S., this means that it needs to keep Europe under its nuclear umbrella for the foreseeable future.”
French President Emmanuel Macron	Le Grand Continent 12 November 2020	“I profoundly disagree, for instance, with the opinion piece signed by the German Minister of Defence in Politico. I think that it is a historical misinterpretation (...) the United States will only respect us as allies if we are earnest, and if we are sovereign with respect to our defence.”
German Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer	Speech 17 November 2020, Helmut Schmidt University	“The idea of a strategic autonomy for Europe goes too far if it feeds the illusion that we could guarantee security, stability and prosperity in Europe without NATO and without the USA.”
Polish Defence Minister Mariusz Błaszczak	POLITICO 25 November 2020	“I fully agree with my German colleague Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer that Europe cannot replace the U.S.’s key role as a security provider and that we should abandon illusions of “European strategic autonomy.”

In many ways, this is a mock battle. As [Helwig](#) points out, Macron and Kramp-Karrenbauer start from different definitions. Macron starts from the broad meaning of strategic autonomy that he uses [interchangeably](#) with sovereignty. The German Defence Minister narrowly focuses on defence and rightly argues that, as of now, we cannot defend Europe without NATO and the US. Their arguments are compatible if we consider that strategic autonomy is not a dichotomous choice, but a long-term goal that should be reached gradually and variably depending on the issue. In addition, European strategic autonomy does not mean autarky, or that NATO is superfluous. Whenever it appears in EU documents, it is followed by a pledge to cooperate with and complement NATO. In fact, Europe’s quest for strategic autonomy has been paralleled by unprecedented efforts to deepen EU-NATO cooperation.

When you boil it down, Macron and Kramp-Karrenbauer agree: They both argue that Europeans need to strengthen their defence capabilities to stand up for their interests and values and be taken seriously by a Biden administration. The German and French foreign ministers summarised it in their joint [op-ed](#) of 16 November: “We Europeans are no longer only asking ourselves what America can do for us, but what we should do to defend our own security and build a more balanced transatlantic partnership. These are two sides of the same coin.” This is the important takeaway here. A Biden administration will bring a change in tone, but relatively little in terms of substance. Looking back at the Obama era and Biden’s campaign, we can expect three trends to continue shaping Europe’s role in security and defence.

- a. **The call for greater burden-sharing:** As early as 2011, then US Defence Secretary Robert Gates warned that “there will be dwindling appetite and patience in the US Congress – and in the American body politic writ large – to expend increasingly precious funds on behalf of nations that are apparently unwilling to devote the necessary resources or make the necessary changes to be serious and capable

partners in their own defense”. A Biden administration might shift the debate from burden-sharing to risk-sharing, focusing more on output than input. But discussions about troop commitments and readiness will bring no more comfort to Europeans.

- b. **The pivot to the Pacific:** The US concern with China’s growing assertiveness and military might is bipartisan. Deterring its territorial and maritime claims in the South China Sea will remain at the top of Washington’s security agenda. This pivot comes with a preference for ‘leading from behind’ regarding conflicts in Europe’s broader neighbourhood. While we can expect more cooperation on some dossiers such as Russia and Turkey, African conflicts will probably not be a top US priority. We saw this during the Obama era regarding the Libyan, Malian and Central African conflicts – all of which illustrated Europe’s lack of strategic autonomy by exposing important capability gaps.
- c. **‘Buy American and sell anywhere’:** This is part of Biden’s ‘foreign policy for the middle class’. He [announced](#) that he would “bolster American industrial and technological strength and ensure the future is ‘made in all of America’ by all of America’s workers”. He even criticized Trump for making the US more reliant on foreign suppliers in the field of defence. Biden might not torpedo European defence industrial cooperation directly, but he will be tough when it comes to buying – and selling – American.

Moreover, the outcome of the US election was closer than expected. In four years, we might see Trump or a version thereof in the White House. The longer-term horizon is important – not least because filling European capability gaps takes time. Europe’s next-generation fighter jet, for instance, will only be available by 2035-40. In this domain, Europeans are in for a marathon, not a sprint. So, there is no time for strategic procrastination.

3. **Stop debating and address the two sides of the same coin**

Europeans should stop wasting time on theological meta-debates on strategic autonomy regarding security and defence and focus on implementation. Strategic autonomy has been established as an objective in official documents – agreed by unanimity – for seven years. All member states should know by now that this goes hand in hand with a strong transatlantic partnership and close EU-NATO cooperation. Yet another round of meta-debate would take precious time away from addressing two substantial questions that the German and French foreign ministers rightly described as [two sides of the same coin](#).

First, how can Europeans proactively shape a more balanced transatlantic security and defence partnership? The Commission and High Representative Josep Borrell have prepared a first draft of a [“new transatlantic agenda for global change”](#). It proposes a structured EU-US Security and Defence Dialogue and lists a wide range of European security priorities, notably Russia, the Western Balkans, Turkey, Africa and the Middle East. Europeans should use the coming weeks to transform these headlines into a concrete offer. This will imply shouldering more of the burden in their own neighbourhood. The Sahel, already a focus area for the EU’s security and defence policy, is a case in point. A more balanced partnership also means that Europeans should go beyond their strategic comfort zone and engage with American priorities. Preparing an EU strategy for the Indo-Pacific in coordination with the US and NATO could be an interesting starting point.

Second, how can the EU defend its own security? In 2021, the member states will prepare the [Strategic Compass](#) that should concretise the EU’s level of ambition for the decade to come. They should use this opportunity to agree on a set of truly shared strategic priorities and adjust their means accordingly. Prioritising will be controversial but crucial considering stretched [EU-level](#) and national defence spending. As the European Defence Agency noted in a [report](#) of November 2020, the current outlook for collaborative R&T spending levels and the high level of fragmentation in Europe’s defence market “put EU strategic autonomy at risk”. It outlines six priorities for joint capability development

ranging from the Main Battle Tank to Defence in Space. These will stay on paper unless the member states jointly take them forward.

In light of Brexit and their combined economic weight, France and Germany have a special responsibility to provide leadership on the above questions. They should thus set aside their mock debate and focus on forging joint European positions for the more balanced partnership they promised. The real risk is not America's backlash against strategic autonomy, but rather the EU's continued inability to deliver.

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