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LIGHTS - Geopolitics

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Abstract

“Strategic autonomy” has become the magic word when addressing the European dependence in key areas of our economy – from sensitive goods to trade, energy or future technologies – and security policy. “Strategic autonomy” together with “European sovereignty” have entered our European political terminology without having been clearly defined. What does this mean, on concrete terms, for the above mentioned areas? Should this mean emancipation or even autarky with regard to China and the United States? Or at least the necessity of diversifying our sources for sensitive goods? In reality we are in the first phase of a deep change in the orientation of key policies; first steps have been initiated, other, even more difficult ones, will have to follow.

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Strategic autonomy – a promising concept?

Is “strategic autonomy” a panacea to solve at once our problems of economic, scientific, technological, or military dependence? Or the magic word allowing us to concentrate on the essential, a new European political objective? “Strategic autonomy” and, expressed in another, more solemn way, “European sovereignty” have gradually entered our French, German or European political terminology over the past few years.

Should Europe develop its "sovereignty," advocate "strategic autonomy" emancipating itself from the United States, particularly in defense matters, but also better protect its economy and sensitive areas, as Emmanuel Macron and others emphasize — or isn't it an illusion in particular because we live in a globalized, interdependent world?

Josep Borrell, the EU High Representative, defending Europe's progress, emphasizes in a remarkable blog post ('Why European strategic autonomy matters') that the fundamentals of strategic autonomy have been firmly rooted in European policy over the past years. In his view, it is an accepted concept, but it is a fact that the EU uses the two terms without explaining what it concretely means for the concerned areas.

The consequences are misunderstandings, divergences and traditional national reflexes and a not negligible amount of mistrust among Europeans. When the Germans hear the word “strategic autonomy”, their first suspicion is that it is disguised French protectionism.

Are we again before "an agreement to disagree" between Brussels and the member states or is it simply one of the typical European developments – in transition towards new and adapted policy goals?

And this happens in an existential phase of European integration in which it must be acknowledged that Europe has still not managed to emerge really from its profound crisis and to agree on the cornerstones of its self-assertion and of its future.

In the light of the growing and accelerating worldwide crises, in particular the war led by Russia against Ukraine, the renewed fighting in the Middle East, the trade war between the US and China or the uncertainty arising from future US-policies, everyone agrees that Europe should take on a broader responsibility, a greater weight on the international scale and better protect its natural interests.

The observation and the consequences to be drawn from this critical situation imply, despite first positive signals and steps, some inconvenient truths not only for Berlin and Paris, but for the EU as a whole.

What is strategic autonomy about?

What do the terms “strategic autonomy” and/or “European sovereignty” really mean? Could it mean “autarky” of Europe? Does it signify reducing dependence on other competitors and rivals? And to which degree could the dependence on non-EU-countries, on competitors be acceptable? A different degree could be tolerated with regard to allies compared to rivals? Or simply it depends – on the concrete area and product we are talking about!

The French President and other European politicians seem to use these terms in a political sense, close to words like “independence,” “autonomy,” or “capacity for European action,”

hence the two most commonly used term in the debate, 'strategic autonomy' and 'European sovereignty'.

Even the Germans are beginning to use these terms despite their reflex which is often much more legal, even constitutional. Therefore members of the Bundestag, following the French President's repeated public communication, do not hide their concern: They fear that the judges of the German Constitutional Court, already very cautious about Europe, will critically analyse any new integration – and the abandonment of national sovereignty within the framework of Article 23 of the German Constitution.

Take, for example, the term “autonomy” in security and defence matters. If pronounced by a French person, many Germans think that France seeks to separate Europe from the United States. In my opinion, wrongly so. But the negative perception remains!

As for “internal security,” especially when discussing Schengen, it is easier to explain to specialists that the current weak state of control applied by the EU-member states actually means that states have lost their sovereignty in the areas of immigration, cross-border crime, or terrorism for years. Consequently, they can only win back their sovereignty through more intense cooperation with other states, hence the absolute need to deepen permanent cooperation in these areas.

The scope of strategic autonomy

In this sense, it seems that there are indeed areas where closer alignment of positions and a common positioning appear perfectly possible following genuine European debates. “Strategic autonomy” seems of particular importance for key technologies, energy, sensitive areas such as pharmaceuticals or telecom, and defence.

The objective of strategic autonomy seems to meet with agreement, even underlining a necessity in the economic area in order to reduce dependence and vulnerability of the European economy, in particular with regard to China.

Progress has been reached under the guidance of, or with the assistance of, the European Commission, the concrete orientation being different with regard to the area concerned.

A good example constitutes the EU Critical Raw Materials Act and its major goals – the first and initial idea was/is the reduction of dependence on China, and from Russia too since 2022 – and to cooperate more with other countries and partners worldwide.

Another good example is lithium, needed for batteries, for which the diversification of sources seems slowly to advance. Or take uranium, till now imported from Russia, and for which Europeans are rediscovering Canada as a supplier.

The pharmaceutical sector is another example. The Europeans discovered during the COVID-crisis their large dependence on drugs produced in India or China, therefore have made efforts to relocate production of sensitive drugs to Europe or to diversify production.

International trade is directly linked to the subject. “Strategic autonomy” has much to do with conditions of trade. The extraterritoriality of US commercial and legal measures regularly causes deep irritation in Europe. When will the EU dispose of similar means? Similarly, how can Chinese (or American) companies buy sensitive technology companies in Europe, but not Europeans in China (or the United States)? Therefore, the EU's top priority should be to protect sensitive industries not by unilateral protectionism, but in

particular first through ensuring reciprocity in commercial actions or measures, both towards the United States and China, before taking unilateral steps.

“Strategic autonomy” is particularly important when looking at sensitive goods or at the risks of the international “supply chain,” another magic word in today's globalized world.

The accident of a huge container-ship in the Suez-Canal in March 2021 or the Houthi-led attacks against ships in the Red Sea have underlined the importance and the sensitivity of the international supply chain for our economies. But this vulnerability does not concern supply chains alone. Should the diversification of origin not be the first goal in order to avoid or at least reduce potential problems?

Since a few years back we can observe a growing debate about ensuring through trade and investment not only the defence of European interests and values, asserting them against international competitors, but ultimately about achieving a defence capability of these interests on equal terms. Remember either the debates around the treatment of the Uigours in Western China or the debate about the working conditions in low-cost countries through the most recent and contested EU-directive on supply chains.

Attention should also be paid, finally, to monetary and economic coordination issues, which are of extreme political sensitivity. What is the future of our European common financial and monetary field? Does the Franco-German agreement of May 18, 2020, which ultimately enabled the European recovery plan of 750 billion euros, called "next Generation EU", approved at the end of 2020 and financed by borrowing, represent a first step towards a new conception of common debt? Given Germany's particular sensitivity to financial matters the subject remains explosive! But even there, EU needs a certain “strategic autonomy” in order to be able to defend the interests of the European economy and of the European financial market at the international level.

The report Enrico Letta presented in April 2024 to the European Council indicates new paths to follow, to integrate the urgencies the EU is confronted with, and not only with regard to the accomplishment of a real European financial market.

The measures taken in the past few years are in my eyes by far not yet perfect, but the EU seems to be somehow on track, learning by doing – the aim being to develop a common conviction and system for different areas without harming European internal cohesion or the EU's ability to act in concert with partners in a globalized world.

Security and defence

The most complex and challenging domain remains that of security and defence. In this field divergences among European nations, not only on nuclear defence, remain.

Four years ago an indirect debate between the French President and the German Minister of Defence created a crisis of confidence. Her provocative statement was clear: “The illusion of European strategic autonomy must come to an end. Europeans will not be able to replace the crucial role the United States plays as guarantors of their security.”

Emmanuel Macron's response in his interview with 'Le Grand Continent' was no less severe. He emphasized his “profound disagreement” with the German Minister, adding that her view was a “misunderstanding of history.”

The German Minister's detailed reply did not find its way into the French media, as that did not consider it useful to reproduce the nine pages (!) of her speech at the Bundeswehr

University. The interested French reader might have better understood the essence of the majority of Germans' thinking, which is partly – but only partly – different from the French doctrine! In reality, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer had not directed her criticism at Europeans, or even the French, but her statement was primarily intended as a message of loyalty to the future American democrat administration.

And in the Germans' opinion, it was particularly clumsy of France to reignite the political debate publicly by launching a frontal attack on NATO – which certainly needs deep modernization, but labeling it “brain dead” seemed excessive. Certainly, it was a provocative statement, but it must be understood that, for a German, NATO and the United States have been the guarantors of Germany's territorial integrity and freedom for over 70 years.

Emmanuel Macron's words even seemed to have questioned France's place within NATO. They make one wonder about France's true objective. A rupture with the United States? Certainly not. A rebalancing of forces in the medium term? Or simply a strong joke provoked by NATO's attitude towards the Turkish position in the Eastern Mediterranean? Or isn't the objective simply for the EU to become a genuine European pillar, partly or entirely autonomous within NATO?

This debate is by no means new, but has become urgent in Europe. I have always advocated a “European caucus” and a European pillar within NATO, a perspective that our American friends never liked. For some of our European partners, this idea also serves as a red rag!

It is little known and perhaps strange enough that France and Germany developed a “common security and defense concept” as early as 1996, which not only contains a common agenda for gradual rapprochement but also a common definition for key areas, particularly for nuclear, the most sensitive matter.

I quote this text, which could now form the basis for bilateral, or even European, discussions: “Collective defense is based on a combination of conventional forces and nuclear forces adapted to the new strategic landscape. The supreme guarantee of the Allies' security is ensured by the strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance, especially those of the United States; the independent nuclear forces of the United Kingdom and France, which play their own deterrence role, contribute too to the deterrence and overall security of the Allies. Our countries are ready to engage in a dialogue regarding the role of nuclear deterrence in the context of European defense policy.”

In the light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the risks of development on the US side the time seems finally ripe to seriously discuss this pillar and a European defence, separable from NATO but not separate.

Germany, for too long a time on a “pacifistic way, now seems on track with the “Zeitenwende” (changing era), but not yet in a sustainable way. Nevertheless, it is evident that today's Germany, more than in the past, struggles to adhere to the fundamentals of its partners, especially France, not only in nuclear matters but also on security policy.

These are a series of fundamental questions that require a genuine debate, first within political parties, then within parliaments, and ultimately with the aim to achieve a minimum societal consensus! How to break through this real impasse? This will be impossible – and ill-advised – without a thorough debate, followed by a work plan, an intense agenda for the next five years.

Regarding foreign policy and the analysis of its real degree of cooperation, it is urgent to redesign European foreign policy in order to reach progress towards a strategic autonomy of Europe, such as:

Focus more on our vital interests and clear political priorities,

Change methods and ways of working: instead of blaming Brussels or the capitals, let's combine forces in the most effective way. This may result in entrusting the "lead" of subjects or projects to a member state or a group or to the Commission.

Reflect on decision-making and rapid response methods, including considering a European Security Council to steer foreign policy, as relying on qualified majority voting is an illusion.

Fundamental revision of development policy: a common policy, or at least coordinated policy, listening first to the other side rather than implementing our own ideas. This applies in particular to Africa.

A shock start, a departure from the habits of a largely ineffective international presence by daily declarations is necessary. It's never too late to do the right thing – but a redesign of foreign and security policy is urgent. It's not a question of the right community, federal, or intergovernmental approach; it's a question of effectiveness! We just need to want it! Otherwise, we risk losing all influence on issues vital to us. This is obviously a contentious issue. Even setting aside the debate with the United States, it is urgent for Europeans to accept the need to strengthen their defence efforts while simultaneously aiming to establish a true partnership within Europe, as a way of accepting our responsibility and expressing a certain autonomy from the United States.

It is imperative to launch a genuine European program aimed at achieving effective and coordinated spending and, above all, at bringing our cultures closer together. The essential elements are well known: training, information, education, joint armament, a real common market of defence and a coordinated export policy among European arms-exporting countries.

The recent Franco-German agreement, extended to Spain, constitutes an enormous step forward. There have been numerous initiatives in this regard, and progress has been made in these areas, but they nevertheless remain limited and, above all, fragile.

This particularly concerns prestigious Franco-German projects aimed at developing together the future combat aircraft (FCAS) and the future armored vehicle (MGCS) – these projects still suffer from strong political mistrust between Berlin and Paris.

The EU's "strategic compass" (2022) is undoubtedly not a panacea for putting a real European defence on track, but it should be a necessary political signal for substantial medium-term development.

One of the first steps should be – to begin with in a core group – an unvarnished inventory of armament and state of the European armies. In parallel we should fix the basics of a European armament market which cannot be a copy of the EU internal market. It should be based on the real necessities in this field and be done under the control of the member states. From this assessment, we could develop step by step a “European preference” and a “strategic autonomy.” This does not mean excluding the US from the European market, their arms sales are part of the burden sharing.

Let's not forget solidarity

Sovereignty is one of the basic constituting principles of the state. Using this term to emphasize the need for a European policy creates the risk, particularly, of further fueling a debate that has been animated for several years by a number of governments and parties wishing to regain their national sovereignty. "Take back control" was not only the slogan of the Brexiters but also of other nationalist and/or populist forces on the continent.

The term "strategic autonomy" defined according to the relevant domain seems much more appropriate to express the desired objectives either in the field of the economy or in security matters.

To add to this is "solidarity," which is the expression of living together within a community: We help those who are in a difficult situation. In this sense, solidarity is not decreed; it develops, is practiced, and presupposes a kind of mutual trust.

In this sense, sovereignty and solidarity are two fundamental elements that address different situations or domains of life within a community, where individuals depend on each other much more than they realize. And these elements are complementary.

European integration has been, from the outset, an expression of increasing solidarity among states. One of the strongest signals of this was the creation of the European Structural Funds. For this reason, my initial reflection at the very beginning of the Covid crisis and of the urgent need of more expenditure in defence was on extending the structural funds by creating two new funds: one for defence, and the other for post-Covid recovery.

At the same time, a more flexible application for these funds was needed. In addition a certain percentage of the investment of the EIB and the comparable national institutions could be dedicated to defence and climate change as the major subjects of a necessary deep change of key politics. These approaches and methods are certainly less revolutionary than the Franco-German initiative of May 18, 2020, but they are less complex to manage.

Conclusion

All these reservations or obstacles, misunderstandings or divergences – induced by our very different traditions and political systems – should not prevent us from engaging in a profound debate on the decisive strengthening of the EU's action, capabilities and its "strategic autonomy" so that our political, economic, and social model can survive and play a more determining role on the world stage.

Over the past two decades, we have sought solutions and reconciliation between our nations, especially through a pragmatic approach, often avoiding the questions that form the core of our divergences. Today, due to internal and international constraints and developments, we have entered a phase of European construction in which ensuring the survival of our European political, economic, and social model requires us to define our compass and objectives more clearly, to lay our cards on the table regarding what we want to do together at the European level.

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