

European Strategic Autonomy and Russia: An (Un)Obvious Way Forward

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Marcin Terlikowski

*Head of international security program,
Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), Varsovie*

Since 2016 the notion of strategic autonomy, introduced by the Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign And Security Policy (EUGS) in 2016, has become the new point of reference for discussions about the future of the political concept of European defence, broadly understood as the EU's pursuit to be able to make autonomous decisions regarding the use of military force, and then to implement them without reliance on the U.S. and NATO. Indeed, historic decisions to launch Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF) in 2017 were adopted clearly in the context of implementing the EUGS and moving towards a greater strategic autonomy of the EU.

Yet, there is still no common understanding among the EU Member States of what European strategic autonomy should actually mean in practical terms. Further, there are heated discussions, both at the political and the expert levels, about the main aspects and dimensions of this concept. To a large extent main threads of this debate resemble the time when EU was launching the European Security and Defence Policy (now CSDP), as the primary form of implementing the concept of European defence.

Like then, two problems remain central in the debate: consequences of the implementation of strategic autonomy on NATO and the transatlantic bond, and the question of whether strategic autonomy considers only the EU or may involve a wider pool of European states – mostly UK after Brexit. There however one extra issue, which has never been properly addressed since the EU launched CSDP. It is the question on how European strategic autonomy could address security challenges and threats to the EU Member States, posed by Russian policies.

The Meanings of the European Strategic Autonomy

Despite a notorious argument, that the concept of strategic autonomy is vague and its interpretation varies heavily among the EU Member States, the EUGS does provide a somewhat defined perimeter of this concept. On the most general level, autonomy implies capacity of Europe to provide a decisive contribution to both crisis management (referred to by the EUGS as promoting peace and security beyond European borders) and territorial defence missions (understood also in the EUGS as defence from an external attack). Going

further, the EU is meant to be able to act on its own, when the U.S. and NATO choose to opt-out. Apart from that, the EU should enhance its capacity to act in the novel dimensions of security, like energy, cyberspace, information domain, etc. Finally, there is the defence industrial context – the EUGS stresses, that strategic autonomy is also about keeping and developing a competitive European Defence Industrial Base (EDTIB), able to provide European forces with weapons and military equipment, not reliant on external actors' support¹.

Even if the EUGS does not move much further from that, its provisions taken together with the established legal and political framework of the CSDP, make it possible to indicate the three main dimensions, in which the concept of the strategic autonomy would be implemented. They are: political, operational and industrial².

It is probably the defence-industrial aspect of the strategic autonomy, which has been developed the most since the EUGS was presented. It is broadly understood to involve European capacity to develop platforms, weapons and military systems independently from global powers, most importantly the U.S. With no doubt, as of 2019 Europe has a long way to go to narrow the gap with the U.S. in key defence technologies, like 5th generation aircraft, long-range precision fires, air defence, space-based systems, drones or robotics, to name just a few. Consequently, when European governments seek investment into high-end capabilities, they turn mostly to the U.S., to the detriment of both the current and future competitiveness of the EDTIB.

In this context, the EDF is widely considered a very first step in building European strategic autonomy. Being a pool of extra financial resources, earmarked from the Union's budget, it is meant to support not only European defence companies' research on innovative defence technologies, but also the development of key military capabilities by the EU Member States. Together with PESCO, a mechanism meant to provide a stable and transparent framework for the defence cooperation of the 25 EU Member States which joined it, the EDF is therefore also seen as a tool aimed to help improve defence capabilities of the Member States. PESCO itself, with the 34 cooperative projects launched so far, and – perhaps more importantly – the binding criteria, which *inter alia* encourage governments to seek more defence cooperation with their EU partners, present a chance to strengthen the overall military capacity of Europe.

Both PESCO and EDF indicate the importance of the operational dimension of the concept of strategic autonomy. The key problem here is the European ability to plan, prepare, launch and conduct a military operation without relying on NATO and U.S. enablers: command and control systems, strategic transport, logistic support, satellite communications and imagery, reconnaissance, etc. Until today, there has been a very limited number of scenarios, in which the EU could deploy and sustain a military operation on its own. Nation- or NATO-owned enablers have remained a backbone of EU military operations of an executive, i.e. combat character. Of course, the EU has made a significant progress over the last 15 years in increasing its capacity to run military operations autonomously³. Yet, the insufficient number of combat

¹ Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign And Security Policy, June 2016, p. 9, 11, 19-20, 42-46.

² For a comprehensive analysis of the concept of strategic autonomy, see: D. Fiott, *Strategic autonomy: towards 'European sovereignty' in defence?* Issue Brief, no 12/2018, EUISS. For national views, see: F. Arteaga, T. Jermalavicius, A. Marrone, J.-P. Maulny, M. Terlikowski, *Appropriate Level of European Strategic Autonomy*, ARES Report no 8, IRIS 2016.

³ More on the EU military command and control capacity and its evolution, see: T. Tardy, *MPCC: towards an EU military command?*, Issue Brief, no 7/2017, EUISS.

and non-combat enablers makes it more than likely, that U.S. or NATO support would be still required to enable the success of any EU military operation of an executive character.

Finally, the political dimension of strategic autonomy is broadly understood as the ability of the EU to develop and implement its own policies on key strategic issues regarding security of its neighbourhood and beyond, rather than bandwagon with other powers. Following a sharp increase in the transatlantic tensions during the first two years of the tenure of Donald Trump, this dimension gained a clear U.S. context. Despite the fact, that crises in the transatlantic relations follow a recurring pattern, as provided for instance by the 2003 divide over the American-led intervention in Iraq, it is widely argued in Europe, that Trump policy is not an outlier. In response to the growing multipolarity of the global order, the U.S. is poised to develop policies, which may not be compatible with European interests or values. Consequently, Europe should be able to develop capacity to formulate its own policies and tools required to firmly to stand by them, regardless of the U.S. positions. It is worthwhile to note, however, that the revisionism of Russia, whose foreign policy goals are in practice much more contradictory to European aims and values, than the U.S., are barely mentioned in the context of strategic autonomy, if at all.

Russia and European Defence: The Elephant in the Room

Indeed, the question of Russia remains distinctively absent in the discussion about the development and implementation of the concept of strategic autonomy, and not only in its political dimension. The EUGS refers to Russia in a vague and limited way. On the one hand, it reckons that managing the relationship with Russia “represents a key strategic challenge” for the EU. Further, it declares that the current state of EU-Russia relations will not change unless Russia returns to compliance with international law and with political obligations, which are fundamental for European security, mostly from the Helsinki Final Act and the Paris Charter. The EUGS also stresses, that the EU will keep working to enable post-Soviet states to freely decide on their desired model of relations with the EU. On the other hand, the EUGS fails to directly say what threats Russian policies pose for the EU Member States and – perhaps more importantly – it remains silent about how the strategic autonomy could address Russian revisionism and willingness to use force in pursuit of its illegitimate interests vis-à-vis its direct and close neighbors. At the same time the EUGS indicates, that sectoral and limited cooperation with Russia may still be furthered⁴.

The core reason of this situation is that by very design, the European defence was never meant to involve a classic, politico-military threat, posed by a state actor, let alone a regional – if not global – power, like Russia.

The European level of ambition in the operational dimension – as it could be put under today’s terms of debate – has been the so-called Petersberg tasks. Agreed in 1992, they involved – broadly understood – crisis management operations, which the reactivated Western European Union (WEU) was meant to be run autonomously in case NATO and the U.S. opted out. With the EU taking over WEU competencies, Petersberg tasks became the foundation of the EU’s CSDP. Even if the list of tasks was expanded and specified in more detail in 2007 with

⁴ Shared Vision, Common Action... op. cit., p. 33.

the Treaty of Lisbon, the EU has been still expected to develop its defence capacity only to address asymmetric and non-military threats⁵.

What followed was reluctance of EU Member States to see CSDP applicable to conflicts in the post-Soviet space and the concentration of the operational activity of the EU on its southern neighborhood. Also the development of military capabilities under the EU initiatives and frameworks was clearly geared towards the requirements of crisis management.

It goes without saying, that CSDP was purposefully designed not to address potential threats coming from Russian policies. One may even argue, that the EU was able to start implementing the concept of European defence, precisely because Russia remained an “elephant in the room” in the debates about European security. Indeed, the two processes have been intertwined: the development of CSDP and the shift from the Cold-War perception of Russia as an existential threat, to an approach, in which this country was seen as an indispensable, strategic partner of the West.

The EU developed the basic political framework of CSDP in late 1990s and early 2000s. This was possible only owing to a difficult consensus on the relation between the EU’s newly established military instrument and NATO. The philosophy behind it was that the position of NATO as the pillar of European security – together with the fundamental role of the Art 5 of the Washington Treaty – must have remained intact⁶. The results was a number of caveats and self-limitations of the CSDP. The most significant one, even if not spelled directly in a legal sense, was an assumption, that the EU would not address politico-military threats to its Member States, as this would challenge the position of NATO and potentially undermine the transatlantic bond⁷.

More importantly however, the launch of the CSDP happened in conditions of an on-going strategic shift in Europe: the European security environment was at that time perceived as finally free from an existential, politico-military threat posed by a global, nuclear power. In other words, no one believed that Russia might again become a threat to the West. Consequently, the scenarios, in which Europe was meant to use force autonomously from the U.S. and NATO, were naturally limited to crisis management.

The Essence of The Russian Threat

Twenty years later, the general perception of Russia in Europe is far from optimistic. Even if there are still deep divergences between EU Member States in how they perceive the place and role of Russia in Europe, at least some aspects of Russian policies are now widely understood as a potential challenge, if not an open threat to European security. Most importantly, Russia is seen to be willing and able to use force – both bare and more clandestine – in pursuit of its illegitimate interests to the detriment of the EU Member States.

⁵ The original list involved: “humanitarian and rescue tasks; peacekeeping tasks; tasks of combat forces in crisis management, including peace-making” See: Petersberg Declaration of WEU Council of Ministers, Bonn, 19 June 1992. The Treaty of Lisbon broadened it to involve also: “joint disarmament operations; military advice and assistance tasks; post-conflict stabilisation tasks”, see: art 43 of the Treaty on European Union.

⁶ This approach was represented by the famous three “Ds”: no decoupling of the European defence from NATO, no duplication of NATO efforts by the EU and no discrimination of non-NATO EU members. See for instance: R.E. Hunger, *European Security and Defence Policy: NATO's Companion — or Competitor?*, RAND 2002, pp. 34-44.

⁷ The most vivid result of this approach was the lack of Member States willingness to operationalize the mutual defense clause of the art 42.7 of the Treaty on EU for years after adopting it in the Lisbon Treaty.

This assessment is in the first place the consequence of the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014. The illegal annexation of Crimea and staging a separatist conflict in Donetsk and Lughansk are interpreted as a signal, that Russia is ready to change borders in Europe by force. Further, at least since 2008 Russia has been developing a destabilizing force posture at its borders with NATO, resulting in a local military advantage over the members of the Alliance. A particular – and at the same time the most recent – feature of this imbalance is so-called Russian Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD) capacity, which involves missile systems, capable of engaging targets, located deep in NATO's territory (on land, at sea and in the air) from far inside Russia.

At the same time, Russia has advanced in dismantling European disarmament, arms control, and confidence building regimes. In its most recent move, Russia was proven to deploy a land-launched missile with a range non-compliant with the Treaty on Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF). The subsequent collapse of the INF regime, due in August 2019, is seen as the strongest blow to military stability and transparency in Europe to date, with still unidentified consequences.

Yet, Russian threat to Europe in the politico-military dimension does not involve an all-out war with the U.S. and NATO. It is still a very remote scenario. A more likely one is a limited conflict, building on the Russian time- and space- advantage in the Eastern Flank, which is possible due to Russian superiority over regional NATO members both in conventional capabilities and the A2/AD systems. Potential operational goals of Russia are understood to involve establishing facts on the ground – in particular: a land grab of a part of NATO territory – before the Alliance is able to properly respond, both at the political and military level, and most importantly before reinforcements are moved to the theater⁸.

On a politico-strategic level, Russian aim would be then to prove NATO – or broadly speaking: the West – incapable of reacting in due time to an armed attack, and unable to take a decision about restoring *staus quo ante* by force, i.e. fighting back the territory taken by Russia. Consequently, Russia would effectively undermine Art 5 of the Washington Treaty, question the viability of the U.S. guarantees for American allies in NATO and beyond, and make a case for negotiating a new legal and political security order in Europe.

The latter has been pursued by Russia ever since the end of the Cold-War, even if the West has over years largely failed to understand Russian motivations, perceptions and goals. Only after the aggression on Ukraine, Russia was started to be widely seen in Europe as a revisionist power, seeking to dismantle the current European security order, which assumes freedom of states in choosing alliances or other organizations they want to belong in. Instead, Russia is striving to establish a *de facto* concert of powers, a system in which it would be able to block sovereign decisions of its direct and close neighbors, if there were seen by Russian elites as detrimental to their political, economic and security interests. A successful military campaign against NATO, even if short and limited to the Eastern Flank, would greatly help Russia meeting this goal.

Yet, Russian threat to Europe does not involve only a military dimension. Russia has been directly undermining security of the EU Member States long before 2014, and continues to do so with the use a whole set of non-military tools. It openly used dependency of a number of

⁸ See, for instance: B. Fabian , M. Gunzinger, J. v. Tol, J. Cohn, G.Evans, *Strengthening the Defense of NATO's Eastern Frontier*, CSBA 2019, p. II-III.

the EU Member States on its exports of hydrocarbons (gas and oil) to exert political pressure on them⁹. Since 2015, it has engaged militarily and politically in the southern neighborhood of the Union, where its actions have gone clearly against the priorities – and local partners – of the EU. Through fake news, disinformation and propaganda, it has interfered in electoral processes not only in the U.S. in 2016, but also in the EU. Last, but not least, it staged an unprecedented chemical attack on a territory of the UK in 2018 against one of its former spies (Skripal case).

As of 2019 Russian military presence extends all around the EU: not only – obviously – to the East, but also to the South: Russian troops are in Syria, Libya and in Central Africa. Russia is also widely believed to assist populist and revisionist political groupings, which seek re-shaping the internal politics of the key EU Member States. Finally, it is actively trying to drive a wedge between the different groups of the EU Member States and – perhaps most importantly – between Europe and the U.S.

The (Un)Obvious Way Forward

There is nothing in the current policy of Russia, which would allow to assume, that its approach to the European security order is an outlier, and that it will at some point return to a fully cooperative relation with the West. Rather, the EU should be preparing to address a long-term, structured security challenge from Russia; for some EU Member States Russian policies may even pose a threat to their existential interests.

The implication of this assumption is straightforward: if the EU is to become more strategically autonomous, it has to embrace a bold role in addressing security challenges and threats posed by Russia, both of a politico-military and asymmetric/non-military character. While following the agreed principles of non-duplication and full coherence with NATO, which have been repeated in every single EU decision regarding the implementation of the EUGS, the EU should explore areas and ways, in which it could both: assist the Member States in addressing Russian threat, and help underwrite NATO's policy of deterrence and defence against Russia.

As regards the political dimension of the concept of strategic autonomy, this would translate in the short term to maintaining post-2014 sanctions and the agreed, principal approach to Russia strictly linked to the situation of Crimea and Donbas are met. Likewise, the EU should keep its current policy towards the frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space, and stand firmly on its positions as regards the future chances and opportunities for the Eastern Partnership countries. In the long-term, the EU should however develop an understanding among its Member States, that in the multipolar world, marked by rivalry of powers, its approach to Russia – a regional and nuclear power – has to be realistic. If so, EU-Russia relations need to be based on the principle of balancing dialogue and cooperation with deterrence, even if the latter would involve mostly denying Russia the ability to pursue its political, economic and military interests to the detriment of the EU Member States. In other words, the EU could aim to develop a deterrence by denial capacity with regards to Russia.

This approach to Russia would mean in practice – in the operational dimension of the concept of strategic autonomy – that the EU would help Member States build resilience towards security challenges and threats posed by Russian activities. This could be done by setting a framework, allowing to use all of its available tools, from across all of the EU policies, to help

⁹ See: S. A. Gawlikowska-Fyk, M. Terlikowski, B. Wiśniewski, S. Zaręba, *Nord Stream 2: Inconvenient Questions*, "PISM Policy Paper", no. 5 (165), July 2018.

the Member States address Russian actions and policies in the areas, in which the EU has some particular assets, capacities and advantages over other vehicles, including NATO. They involve, but are not limited to, information domain (propaganda, fake news, disinformation), cyberspace (cyberattacks) or energy security (policy of coercion, exploiting energy dependencies). As of 2019, the EU has already a wide toolbox to deal with these, divergent as they are, security challenges and threats. The EU political clout, legislative power, ability to streamline Member States cooperation and capacity to establish practical projects at different levels of governance (regional, national, local), altogether make it potentially the most effective actor in addressing security challenges and threats from Russia, which lack a military character, but at the same time are too complex for a single nation to deal with.

But the EU should and could move further than that and help Member States address also the military dimension of the Russian threat. To begin with, because of its regulative power, the EU can bring down legal barriers, which hamper and slow down the crossing of intra-EU borders by military personnel and hardware. At the same time, the ability to co-fund infrastructure projects makes the EU also a key stakeholder in improving the existing – or constructing new – physical objects, which are essential for a swift movement of military personnel across the EU (like roads, bridges, railways, harbors, air- and sea-ports of debarkation, etc.). This issue has already been put under the “military mobility” banner and captured special attention of both the Member States and the EU institutions¹⁰. This is perhaps a historical pilot case for the EU taking action, aimed mostly – if not exclusively – at reinforcing the credibility of NATO’s deterrence and defence against Russia.

Next, it is also the defence-industrial dimension, where the concept of strategic autonomy can be directly linked with the military threat from Russia. In line with the principle of non-duplication and coordination with NATO, the EU could make sure – through its internal regulations – that a substantive number of PESCO and EDF projects respond to capability gaps, which are identified in the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) and have a direct effect on the ability of NATO to implement its strategy, which assumes a swift movement of reinforcement to its frontline states, in case of a crisis of conflict. Here again, some initial work has been already done in the EU to assure that the Union’s own Capability Development Mechanism (CDM) will be informed by the NDPP; the results are already promising.

Conclusions

Finding a consensus among the EU Member States on how the development and implementation of the concept of strategic autonomy could address the politico-military threats and other security challenges posed by Russia will neither be an easy, nor a quick task. Yet, the stake is high: it is about breaking the taboo of European defence, which has remained blind to the Russian threat for far too long. If this is done in a consensual way, respecting both the perceptions of EU members with regards to the role of NATO and the transatlantic bond in guaranteeing Europe’s security, and the facts on the ground as regards military capabilities available to the EU, then defence may finally find its place as an indispensable part of the European integration project. Further, transatlantic tensions over the respective tasks of NATO and EU in the defence area may be alleviated and the defences of Europe against a broader array of threats, coming from different strategic dimensions, could also increase.

¹⁰ There is a separate PESCO project, dedicated to the issue of military mobility, and there is a European Commission Action Plan on this issue. See: M. Terlikowski, *PESCO: First Projects and the Search for (a Real) Breakthrough*, Bulletin PISM no 65 (1136) 8 May 2018.

Early successes in developing the concept of strategic autonomy, i.e. the launch of PESCO and EDF and linking them at the political and technical level with NATO, suggest that such a breakthrough is within the reach of Europe, as long as it will take.