

EUROPEAN UNION STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE

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Abstract: The main goal of this paper is to discuss the need for EU to achieve strategic autonomy in the upcoming years and shed light on how this concept is shaping EU's future. The question underpinning this research is focused on the reasons why strengthening EU's strategic autonomy matters so much in shaping said future. Strategic autonomy cannot be limited only to security and defense, as many more fields need to embed this concept in 2021. In this sense, the paper does not address directly the complementarity with NATO and the defense and security dimension of strategic autonomy, but rather focuses on the political and economic implications of EU's strategic autonomy. Also, as more global actors begin to review their dependencies and try to identify alternatives, especially after the Covid-19 crisis, a more in-depth and a multi-pronged approach is required in relation to the geopolitical interests of external actors and their impact on creating a stronger European strategic autonomy. The paper also addresses the idea that the strategic autonomy is rather a question of survival of the European project, otherwise EU is running the risk of becoming irrelevant in the event that its "weight" and economic power in the world would diminish to worrying levels. Thirty years ago, EU represented 25% of the global wealth. It is foreseen that in 20 years, EU will not represent more than 11% of the world's GNP, far behind China and the US. Ultimately, the paper focuses on the compelling role the EU needs to take as a global leading leader in order to protect and promote its values and interests worldwide and to address the current geopolitical challenges. There is no better starting point for this than to engage in an extensive and inclusive dialogue with the citizens about the way ahead, and the Conference on the Future of the EU seems to be the appropriate platform. The topics of the Conference included amongst other, climate change, jobs and economy, EU's role in the world, or digitalization issues. In other words, every priority that needs to be adapted to the logic of strategic autonomy and help EU build a stronger profile in the global landscape.

Keywords: Conference on the Future of the EU, European Union, European security, geopolitics, strategic autonomy



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Rezumat: Scopul principal al acestei lucrări este de a discuta necesitatea Uniunii Europene pentru atingerea autonomiei strategice în următorii ani precum și de a examina modul în care acest concept modelează viitorul UE. Întrebarea care stă la baza acestei cercetări vizează motivele pentru care consolidarea autonomiei strategice a UE contează atât de mult în modelarea viitorului comunitar. Deoarece în 2021, autonomia strategică nu poate fi limitată doar la securitate și apărare, întrucât multe alte domenii trebuie să încorporeze acest concept, lucrarea nu abordează direct complementaritatea cu NATO și dimensiunea de apărare și securitate a autonomiei strategice, ci mai degrabă implicațiile politice și economice ale acesteia în UE. De asemenea, deoarece toți actorii globali își revizuiesc dependențele și încearcă să identifice alternative, în special după criza Covid-19, trebuie făcută o analiză mai aprofundată într-o abordare multi-vectorială în legătură cu interesele geopolitice ale actorilor externi din regiunea Balcanilor de Vest și a impactului acestora asupra creării unei autonomii strategice mai puternice a UE. Lucrarea abordează, de asemenea, și ideea că autonomia strategică este mai degrabă o chestiune de supraviețuire a proiectului european, altfel UE riscă să devină irelevantă, întrucât ponderea și puterea economică a acesteia în lume se diminuează. Acum 30 de ani, UE reprezenta 25% din bogăția lumii, în timp ce unele previziuni pentru următorii 20 de ani, susțin că UE nu va reprezenta mai mult de 11% din PNB mondial, cu mult în spatele Chinei și SUA. În cele din urmă, lucrarea se concentrează pe rolul convingător pe care UE trebuie să-l asume ca lider global pentru a-și proteja și promova valorile și interesele la nivel mondial, pentru a putea face față provocărilor geopolitice actuale. În acest scop, nu există un punct de plecare mai bun decât angajarea într-un dialog amplu și incluziv cu cetățenii cu privire la calea de urmat, iar Conferința privind viitorul UE pare a fi platforma adecvată. Subiectele Conferinței includ, printre altele, *schimbările climatice, economia, rolul UE în lume, digitalizarea*, domenii care au nevoie să încorporeze conceptul de autonomie strategică, inclusiv pentru a ajuta UE să își construiască un profil mai consolidat în peisajul global.

Cuvinte cheie: autonomie strategică, Conferința privind viitorul UE, geopolitică, securitate europeană, Uniunea Europeană

I. Introduction

In times of crises, be it economic (2009), refugee (2015) or the Covid-19 pandemic (2020-2021), all eyes were on the EU's capacity to adequately respond and find solutions. Therefore, the *Geopolitical Commission*, the term itself implies a new level of engagement of EU in the global realm, acting in a rapidly evolving geopolitical environment, was established to find those partners and those alliances which will help not only protect EU's values and interests but also promote them and work to advance them. This would in fact mean that EU strategic autonomy in 2021 could be

defined as the EU capacity to act autonomously when and where necessary and with partners wherever possible in order to achieve security in all fields of action, disseminate EU standards, and promote EU values globally, while acting on previously agreed goals and commitments and in compliance with international law.

Broadening the understanding of the concept of strategic autonomy from defense and applying it as a horizontal principle underpinning EU's recovery after the Covid-19 pandemic as well as steering the EU towards a more resilient, sustainable, and fair Europe, will be critical in the coming years, in order to strengthen EU multilateral action and its position in relation to other external actors. As the President of the European Council, Charles Michel stated in September 2020, “European strategic autonomy is goal #1 for our generation. For Europe, this is the real start of the 21st century”¹. And this is also recognized in the 2019-2024 Strategic Agenda, where EU's need to “act autonomously” is also highlighted, together with its ambitions: industry and trade policy, green deal, digitalization, the neighborhood policy, etc.².

In order to achieve these ambitious goals, EU must have both the means and the resources, while also taking into account the internal and external factors that might hinder the entire process. Internally, the considerable length of the EU decision-making process and divergent positions of member states that make it hard to reach consensus, represent a struggle and an obstacle in increasing EU's strategic autonomy. Also, external factors, in the pursuit of their own political and economic interest will use the EU's vulnerabilities and indecisiveness to act swiftly, in order to strengthen their position. In strategic terms, in order for the EU to ensure its future viability, it needs to address the following priorities: increase EU capacity to act autonomously when and where necessary and with partners wherever possible; focus on increasing its capability to react swiftly in order to address the current and future challenges; less dependence and more influence.

The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell gave a clear direction for this, expressing the need for a

¹ Charles Michel (@eucopresident), “The EU's massive response to the pandemic sends a clear message: United, Europe is a world power. And we are strengthening our strategic autonomy for the well-being of our citizens. #EUBEF20”, Twitter, 8 September 2020, <https://twitter.com/eucopresident/status/1303268888113803264>, accessed 15 May 2021.

² European Council, “A new strategic agenda 2019-2024”, 20 June 2019, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/06/20/a-new-strategic-agenda-2019-2024/>, accessed 15 May 2021

more effective strategic autonomy “widened to new subjects of an economic and technological nature”³. The President of the European Council, Charles Michel, also emphasized the need for stability and dissemination of the EU standards in order to achieve “Less dependence, more influence”⁴.

In Part one of this research paper, the aim is to review the evolution of the concept of strategic autonomy and analyze its objectives (stability, EU capacity to set standards, and EU values’ promotion). Part two focus will focus on what is the required course of action for strengthening the EU strategic autonomy, whereas Part three will analyze the challenges posed by the external actors to this process. Finally, in Part four, the evolution in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe will be addressed. Methodologically wise, the paper has a constructivist approach which aims to offer a better understanding of the importance of EU strategic autonomy and of the Conference on the Future of the EU, based on three principles: personal experience, active learning, and social interactions⁵. According to the constructivist design theory, learners actively construct their knowledge, rather than simply absorb ideas spoken to them by teachers based on their background, experience, and skills. Hence, making connections with previous experiences and constructing knowledge based on these experiences creates an active learning environment. The critical thinking skills and social interactions allow for new understandings based on personal experiences and exchange of ideas which can shape perspectives and consolidate new information. The methodology of the study is based on the empirical review of the available literature and analyzing the relevant contexts focusing on the practical implications and future perspectives.

The developments are presented in a chronological timeline in order to explain and show how the strategic autonomy concept has evolved over the years and how it became embedded when discussing the future of the European Union. The main goal is to demonstrate both the complexity and the importance of the concept and its impact on EU’s future as well as to validate

³ Josep Borrell, “Why European strategic autonomy matters”, *EEAS10*, 03 December 2020 https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/89865/why-european-strategic-autonomy-matters_en, accessed 15 May 2021.

⁴ Charles Michel, (@eucopresident), “Strategic autonomy means more resilience, less dependence & more influence. This should be our common goal. It’s good for our transatlantic alliance when both sides are stronger and more robust.”, Twitter, 10 February 2021, <https://twitter.com/eucopresident/status/1359558856293175305>, accessed 15 May 2021.

⁵ See chapter on: “Constructivist Design Theory”, in Rita C. Richey, James D. Klein, and Monica W. Tracey, *The Instructional Design Knowledge Base: Theory, Research, and Practice (First Edition)* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), 129–144.

the hypothesis that EU cannot remain relevant in the global context in the coming years without a strong strategic autonomy. The paper is not directly addressing the complementarity with NATO and the defense and security dimension of the strategic autonomy as these have already been analyzed and discussed over the years⁶. However, the political and economic implications of EU's strategic autonomy need a more in-depth analysis and a multidimensional approach. In proposing a multilevel analysis, the study aims to establish the facts and explain the importance and complexity of the EU strategic autonomy in the coming years and the importance of the Conference on the EU future in this process. The use of the multilevel analysis is needed for the purpose of this paper as through this methodological approach, relationships between variables at different levels can be analyzed and they can show us how “individual” variables along with common variables can influence the overall outcome.

Even though an exhaustive analysis of all the elements of the multilevel research on the proposed subject goes beyond the scope of this paper, focusing on the bigger picture and following a constructivist design⁷, can bridge the research-practice gap.

II. EU Strategic Autonomy in the Making

Europe addressed the concept of strategic autonomy even before the concept itself was born. In 1950, Jean Monnet stated that “*Il faut véritablement créer l'Europe, qu'elle se manifeste à elle-même et à l'opinion américaine et qu'elle ait confiance*

⁶ NATO, “NATO 2030: United for a New Era. Analysis and Recommendation of the Reflection Group appointed by the NATO Secretary General”, 25 November 2020, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf, accessed 17 November 2021; Jolyon Howorth, “Strategic Autonomy and EU-NATO Cooperation: A Win-Win Approach”, *Centre international de formation européenne*, 2019, <https://www.cife.eu/Ressources/FCK/image/EEF/Preview-EEF-389.pdf>, accessed 17 November 2021; Lucia Retter et al., “European Strategic Autonomy in Defence. Transatlantic visions and implications for NATO, US and EU relations”, *RAND Research*, 9 November 2021, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1319-1.html, accessed 17 November 2021; Dick Zandee et al., “European strategic autonomy in security and defense. Now the going gets tough, it's time to get going”, *Clingendael, Netherlands Institute of International Relation*, December 2020, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/Report_European_Strategic_Autonomy_December_2020.pdf, accessed 17 November 2021.

⁷ Fred C. Lunenburg, “Constructivism and technology: instructional designs for successful education reform”, *Journal of Instructional Psychology* 25, no. 2 (1998): 75-81.

en son propre avenir”⁸. And again, on 16 March 1950, it was mentioned by General Charles de Gaulle during a press interview⁹. Despite their very different conceptions and understandings, the two were united however in the belief that the European organization was essential for peace, economic progress, and dealing with external actors, like the superpowers of that time – America and the Soviet Union. In this sense, Monnet pledged for a “supranational Europe”, while de Gaulle advocated for a “Europe of states” and for international cooperation which by then was possible due to the technical progress in communications, the intensification of exchanges, and economic interdependence¹⁰.

Although the phrase as such was not used at the time, the need for a strategic autonomy was reflected from the end of the World War II and throughout the Cold War, when US took a central role in European post-war recovery. However, what was then understood by strategic autonomy became obsolete with the Bretton Woods System’s collapse, leading to European countries monetary cooperation and, in the end, to the Euro currency, thus giving birth to a new level and meaning of “strategic autonomy”, governed by financial globalization and the single market. Years later, the concept itself continued to evolve and in 1994, France once again was leading the way. In the *Livre Blanc sur la Défense*¹¹, the need for Europe to do more in order to increase “[its] own or joint capacities” with NATO was highlighted¹². But what underpinned the EU-wide agreement for a robust military capability was the St. Malo declaration in 1998: “the union must have the capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military force, the means to decide to use them, and a readiness to do

⁸ Eng. trans.: “Europe must be truly created, it must show itself to itself and to the American public, and it must have confidence in its own future.”. See: Jean Monnet, “Memorandum 3 May 1950 addressed to Georges Bidault, President of the Council”, *The Federalist. A Political Review*, Year XXX, no. 3 (1988): 230, <https://www.thefederalist.eu/site/index.php/fr/le-federalisme-dans-l-histoire-de-la-pensee/1786-jean-monnet>, accessed 15 May 2021.

⁹ Charles de Gaulle, *Discours et messages, tome II - Dans l'attente* (Paris: Plon, 1970), 344-358.

¹⁰ Pierre Gerbet, “Jean Monnet – Charles de Gaulle. Deux conceptions de la construction européenne”, in *Jean Monnet, l'Europe et les chemins de la Paix*, eds. Gérard Bossuat and Andreas Wilkens (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 1999), 411-433.

¹¹ The second *White Paper on Defense* (1994) redefined French strategy on defense and national security and served as the foundation for all-professional armed forces in 1996, multi-year planning and spending. It aimed to adapt the capabilities of deterrence, to define a new role for conventional forces, the new operational priorities, and the armament policy (see: République Française, “Livre Blanc sur la Défense et la Sécurité Nationale”, <http://www.livreblancdefens.eetsecurite.gouv.fr/>, accessed 17 November 2021).

¹² République Française, “Livre Blanc sur la Défense”, 1994, <http://www.livreblancdefenseetsecurite.gouv.fr/pdf/le-livre-blanc-sur-la-defense-1994.pdf>, accessed 15 May 2021.

so”¹³ and this paved the way for the European Security and Defense Policy, launched in 1999. It was in fact the wars in Yugoslavia which triggered such a shift from declarations to concrete actions, that missed “hour of Europe”¹⁴, which showed the entire world the European gap between capabilities and expectations¹⁵, a clear image of the fact that achieving a credible EU foreign and security policy relied also on appropriate military capabilities, as stated in the St. Malo declaration.

In more recent years, other challenges were added to the security context, and it was clear that the strategic autonomy concept needed to evolve once again. The inability of the euro currency to challenge the US dollar and the EU markets dependency on the American markets, as reflected by the 2008 financial crisis, and the increased influence and interference on the part of external actors, such as Russia, China, and the Gulf states, within EU and in its immediate neighborhood (Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries), have brought the subject back on the European agenda, but this time, in an even more multifaceted way.

If between 2013 and 2015 the concept was almost exclusively linked to the defense industry, in the EU Global Strategy (2016) it was defined as an ambition to reach “an appropriate level of strategic autonomy” to “ensure Europe’s ability to safeguard security within and beyond its borders”.¹⁶ Also, since 2016, all European Council meetings have addressed the issue of strategic autonomy, under the understanding that it represents the “capacity to act autonomously when and where necessary and with partners wherever possible”.¹⁷ With Brexit,

¹³ Maartje Rutten, “From St. Malo to Nice, European Defense: core documents”, *Chaillot Papers* 47 (May 2001): 8, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/cp047e.pdf>, accessed 15 May 2021.

¹⁴ Jacques Poos, Luxembourg Foreign Minister, in a Press statement from 28 June 1991, in the wake of the cease fire arrangement, asserting that the European Union would take the lead role in addressing the Balkan conflicts” (see: Alan Riding, “Conflict in Yugoslavia; Europeans send High-Level Team”, *The New York Times*, 29 June 1991, <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/06/29/world/conflict-in-yugoslavia-europeans-send-high-level-team.html>, accessed 15 May 2021).

¹⁵ Christopher Hill, “Closing the Capability-Expectations Gap?”, Paper for the Fifth Biennial International Conference of the European Community Studies Association of the United States, 29 May-1 June 1997, Seattle, Washington, 5-6, http://aei.pitt.edu/2616/1/002811_1.PDF, accessed 15 May 2021.

¹⁶ European Union External Action Service, “Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy”, June 2016, https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf, accessed 16 May 2021.

¹⁷ Council of the European Union, “Council Conclusions on implementing the EU Global Strategy in the area of security and defense”, 14 November 2016, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/22459/eugs-conclusions-st14149en16.pdf>, accessed 16 May 2021.

France is seeking to substitute UK's role in the defense of the EU and with this, the concept not only re-emerged but also gained new connotations and dimensions (defensive and offensive).

During these years, the concept has also been linked to European sovereignty and its scope was broadened to encompass all types of European strategic interests. If for the concept of European sovereignty, 51% of Europeans consider Europe to be sovereign today¹⁸, the strategic autonomy concept does not receive the same type of support, indicating that more explanations are needed. In the above-mentioned research, it was revealed that the notion of “national sovereignty” is clearly understood by 25% of the respondents while for 46% it was a fairly clear concept. While “European sovereignty” was clear for 16% of the respondents and fairly clear for 47% of them, the “strategic autonomy” came last with only 14% of the responses in the clear range “clear” and 47% in the “fairly clear” range. There are also differences in public perception between the countries where the survey took place. In all eight countries (France, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Spain, and Sweden), 52% of respondents regard it as something positive, 26% as something negative, and 22% as neither positive nor negative. While European sovereignty is least understood in France (54%) and Italy (45%), in the same countries, the concept of strategic autonomy is most clearly understood (obtaining the highest scores). While these interviews were measuring citizen's knowledge and perception, it is obvious that there are substantial differences in the way countries perceive “strategic autonomy” and this is mostly due to their geopolitical positions. While Eastern European countries put more emphasis on the military components of the concept, Central European countries are more interested in its economic dimensions. So, despite the fact there is an agreed language and a common definition, countries have a different understanding when using it in different fields, due to their risk exposure, history, and geography.

Different perceptions, understandings, objectives, and priorities left the concept of strategic autonomy idle for years, but as the EU is required to

¹⁸ Institute Ipsos, March 2021, on behalf of the Fondation Jean-Jaurès and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, interviewed 8,000 people aged 18 and over online between 28 December 2020 and 8 January 2021, based on representative samples. The countries included in the survey (based on the quota method) are France, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Spain, and Sweden. (see: Federico Vacas, Amandine Lama, and Laurène Boisson, “Survey on the European Sovereignty”, *IPSOS*, March 2021, https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2021-03/ipsos_report_-_survey_on_the_european_sovereignty.pdf, accessed 16 May 2021).

assume greater responsibility in the global context, it needs to assert itself in its independence and as a strong partner, to its allies. It seems like the right time has come to do so. In the European Commission Communication on the Industrial Strategy for Europe (2020), it is mentioned that:

“Europe’s strategic autonomy is about reducing dependence on others for things we need the most: critical materials and technologies, food, infrastructure, security and other strategic areas. They also provide Europe’s industry with an opportunity to develop its own markets, products and services which boost competitiveness”¹⁹.

Moreover, throughout 2020, the European Commission incorporated the strategic capacities, capabilities, and responses in several of its initiatives, with the aim of indirectly defining the strategic autonomy in the sense of autonomy to do something, rather than autonomy from something. The focus is placed on increasing the resilience of European economy and industries and their capacity to respond to the needs of EU citizens by themselves and on the strategic assets crucial for EU security, hence for its autonomy.

Thus, in the European Commission Communication Shaping Europe’s Digital Future²⁰, in the Data Strategy²¹ and White Paper on Artificial Intelligence²² – all key blueprints for the digital transition – the European Commission speaks about achieving more and better strategic capacity, while investing in the strategic sectors and capacities enabling development of digital solutions at scale, interoperability and connectivity being key building blocks of the digital transition.

In other policy papers such as EU Foreign Investment Screening Mechanism, adopted in October 2020, Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (currently being discussed in the European Parliament), Communication on the

¹⁹ EUR-LEX, “European Commission Communication: A New Industrial Strategy for Europe – 4th pillar – Reinforcing Europe’s industrial and strategic autonomy”, 10 March 2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?URI=CELEX:52020DC0102&FROM=EN>, accessed 16 May 2021.

²⁰ EUR-LEX, “European Commission Communication: Shaping Europe’s digital future”, 19 February 2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0067&from=EN>, accessed 16 May 2021.

²¹ European Commission, “Communication: A European strategy for data”, Brussels, 19 February 2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0066&from=EN>, accessed 16 May 2021.

²² European Commission, “White Paper on Artificial Intelligence”, 19 February 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/commission-white-paper-artificial-intelligence-feb2020_en.pdf, accessed 16 May 2021.

Trade Policy Review, more emphasis is placed on the economic transformation, geopolitical instability, and the need for an “open strategic autonomy”²³, namely increasing EU’s ability to make its own choices and shape the world according to its strategic interests and values. Thus, the “hour of Europe”, this time called “Europe’s moment”, is acknowledged once again. Aimed at Europe’s recovery after the Covid-19 pandemic, it seeks to promote EU’s economic, monetary, and industrial independence with green and digital transitions, trade, defense, and foreign affairs at its core.

III. What Could Be Done to Strengthen EU’s Strategic Autonomy?

In order to seize this new “Europe’s moment”, three objectives should be placed at the core of EU strategic actions: stability (understood as security of all kinds and in all fields), dissemination of EU standards, and promoting the EU values globally.

Security

This objective should be regarded not only in terms of physical security, defense, and economic security, but also in terms of technology. From digital and technological supremacy, the new technologies and ever-increasing digitalization, which has been experienced more than ever during the Covid-19 pandemic, the new main actors in the globalization and international competition arena are rapidly shaping the global order. Hence, the digital transition and the European data and technological sovereignty, alongside with critical infrastructure resilience and security of supply chains, are primary objectives that need to be achieved. But in order to increase its independence in the critical technological sectors and to protect EU’s economic and strategic interests, it would take a more coherent and integrated approach in terms of investments in capability-development, cutting-edge research and innovation, and even consensus among the member states, committed to the new set of objectives.

²³ European Commission, “Europe’s moment: Repair and Prepare for the Next Generation”, Brussels, 27 May 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_940, accessed 16 May 2021.

EU standards

This objective is building on the already existing EU powers and ranges from the Data Protection Regulation to the newly introduced climate standards. And it is precisely in this field of climate change and environmental protection that the EU is planning to take the lead globally. The capacity to set standards and enforce them at the global level will be crucial for reaching both strategic autonomy and climate targets. Lastly, trade and market conditions will be based on one simple rule “the lower your compliance with standards, the more restricted your access”²⁴.

EU values

The European Union’s fundamental values: human dignity and human rights, freedom, democracy, equality, and the rule of law are at the core of internal and external policies of the EU. In order to pursue these, the EU needs to strengthen and increase its international influence and presence for which is already equipped with a set of tools that have proven so far to be effective. The entire architecture of the external policy with more than 140 EU delegations around the globe has secured a reliable and influential presence on the ground aimed at promoting these values, but there is a need to make a better use of these tools especially in the immediate neighborhood. Revised Enlargement Methodology and Economic and Investment Plans for WB6²⁵ and Eastern Partnership countries²⁶ are part of this re-thinking process.

EU competences supported by the financial means to implement its commitments are the key tools for promoting EU values globally. The EU is set to spend 1.074,3 billion euro²⁷ for its objectives to be fulfilled in the Multi-

²⁴ European Council, “‘Strategic autonomy for Europe - the aim of our generation’ - speech by President Charles Michel to the Bruegel think tank”, 28 September 2020, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/09/28/1-autonomie-strategique-europeenne-est-l-objectif-de-notre-generation-discours-du-president-charles-michel-au-groupe-de-reflexion-bruegel/>, accessed 16 May 2021.

²⁵ The six countries in the Western Balkans, among which four are candidate countries to join the EU (Montenegro, Albania, Serbia, and North Macedonia) and two (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo) are potential candidates.

²⁶ Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine.

²⁷ European Council, “Long-term EU budget 2021-2027 and recovery package”, 17 December 2020, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/the-eu-budget/long-term-eu-budget-2021-2027/>, accessed 16 May 2021.

Annual Financial Framework (MFF) 2021-2027²⁸, to which, amounts from the Recovery and Resilience plans (723,8 billion euro) and the Economic Investment plans (11 billion euro) are dedicated to its immediate neighborhood, with a potential to mobilize up to 37 billion euro in public and private investments in the next decade²⁹.

However, effective and strong strategic autonomy means more than climate neutrality, digital sovereignty, and EU standards and values since their implementation in various areas requires more than clear objectives and political declarations. Avoiding unrealistic goals, such as a European army and focusing its efforts on the autonomy of the political, institutional, and industrial capabilities within the EU could be the basis for a more strengthened global actor role. Advancing its implementation, with the right amount of ambition and leadership, having the governance structures ready, and the available capabilities to deliver on the set objectives is the only way to ensure the success of the process. But the process also has a lot of challenges, such as divergent views on the political and institutional autonomy of EU, with the field of security and defense being an example in this sense. With countries in Central and Eastern Europe having different views on the matter or being opposed to the France-Germany duo defining the priorities, having the right level of engagement is only one part of the problem. When it comes to the operationalization of the autonomy in the field of defense, we find countries like Austria, Cyprus, Finland, Ireland, Malta, and Sweden that play a serious key role in this field, even though they are not NATO members. Yet, when we also take into account the consensus-based procedures, we can see how these aspects make the process of operationalization more difficult especially in terms of implementing joint positions on the foreign, security, and defense policy.

To complicate things further, the informal trio France-Germany-UK, which had a leading role in defense matters, has been crippled by Brexit and it remains

²⁸ European Commission, “EU Funding Programmes”, October 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/find-funding/eu-funding-programmes_en, accessed 16 May 2021.

²⁹ European Commission, “Communication: An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans”, Brussels, 6 October 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/system/files/2020-10/communication_on_wb_economic_and_investment_plan_october_2020_en.pdf, accessed 16 May 2021; and European Commission and The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, “Joint Staff Working Document. Recovery, resilience and reform: post 2020 Eastern Partnership priorities”, Brussels, 2 July 2021, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/swd_2021_186_f1_joint_staff_working_paper_en_v2_p1_1356457_0.pdf, accessed 20 July 2021.

unclear if an EU security and defense policy without UK capabilities can still be a credible and reliable partner for the US. Even if the security dimension is present and predominant, the strong economic interdependence and therefore the vulnerability of the EU, exposed more than ever by the Covid-19 pandemic, are forcing the embedding of the strategic autonomy concept in all current challenges and their assorted solutions: climate change, economy, digitalization, emerging and disruptive technologies, etc. Defending multilateralism over the years brought the EU in a position of increased economic interdependence which now also has high political stakes.

EU's capacity to act autonomously is deemed effective when the decisions and their implementation do not depend on external partners, with which EU may choose to cooperate in the attainment of its objectives, but rather depend on EU's capacity to act, in a unanimous and strategic manner. Therefore, the entire process is underpinned by the political will of the member states and their capacity of pursuing common goals. For the post-pandemic recovery and resilience stage, EU has highlighted that the industrial and economic policies are the key pillars of the EU strategic autonomy, hence reducing existing dependencies is a necessary step forward. The Covid-19 pandemic showed the strong dependencies on imports from Asia (mostly China) and the vulnerability of the internal market with regards to an insufficient domestic production capability. This conclusion can be applied to other areas as well, such as the energy sector.

But rather than focusing on reducing dependency, which is difficult to explain to national voters, the member states could focus on a long-term strategic investment in the energy sector for example, which might prove to be a better way to test the benefits and limits of dependency reduction. Investments in renewable energy sources have the potential to transform both the economy and the society, contributing to the health and well-being of the citizens, as well as fighting global warming and its consequences. Through improving its domestic production capacity, the EU will no longer depend on imports of gas and oil, which are the main source of external dependency, it will instead be able to position itself as a global economic player rather than just being a passive marketplace.

The decline of the domestic primary energy production sector has accelerated in the last years, natural gas and diesel imports have doubled now compared to the 1990s, with Russia being the lead supplier. Thus, increasing the production of energy from other renewable sources has been a priority of

outmost importance for the EU and, as a result, the EU is leading in the field of renewable energy technologies, especially wind power. Having said this, in order to speak about “a strategic economy”, more efforts are needed. The transition to green renewable energy is not only essential from the point of view of reducing dependencies and building strategic autonomy, but also from the point of view of economic recovery after the pandemic, having a direct and positive impact in the citizens’ lives.

Moreover, as the energy sector is interlinked with the climate sector, it has a direct impact on the new ambitions of the EU: a 40 % cut in greenhouse gas emissions; a 32 % share of energy from renewable sources; and a 32.5 % improvement in energy efficiency³⁰. Compared to 1990 levels, it is clear that only through strong joint actions, the necessary transition can be made at the level of all EU member states. Since climate challenges have no borders, this might be the one common goal on which member states will work together without divergent positions, showing both political will and strategic vision, in supporting non-EU states to decarbonize their economies and invest in climate change measures. The Central and Southeastern Europe energy connectivity, the Green Agenda, the Energy Community are not just tools for energy transition and climate action in the Western Balkans and the Black Sea region, but also tools for strategic EU leadership. Divesting from fossil fuels, increasing the production of energy from renewable sources, investing in low carbon production sources should help Europe reach its climate neutrality goals by 2050. This is why in the Next Generation EU (NGEU) recovery instrument, all EU funded programmes, from those that apply in the member states to the Economic Investment Plan in Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership have clean energy and the green deal as core instruments, complete with concrete actions and intermediary milestones.

As the coronavirus pandemic brought along an economic crisis and disruptions in the supply chains, the focus on building a stronger, sustainable, and more resilient economy in the EU increased. This is not something that can be addressed on the short term, but only through the NGEU. The position of the EU on the global market is in jeopardy if something is not changed in its longer-term economic growth perspectives. From research and innovation,

³⁰ European Commission, “2030 climate & energy framework”, September 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/clima/eu-action/climate-strategies-targets/2030-climate-energy-framework_en, accessed 20 May 2021.

SMEs, digitalization, and space projects, all fields could benefit from more investments and ultimately from the benefits of strategic autonomy.

Along with increasing and protecting its domestic production, a strong trade policy could deliver the set objectives by using for example the border carbon adjustment mechanism and ensuring that the carbon content of the goods imported at a lower price than the one on the domestic market of the EU does not lead to unfair competition for its producers and / or force the trading partners to pursue similar goals in the field of climate change. Also, when discussing about EU's strategic autonomy in the context of trade policy, the focus should be placed on multilateralism and on defending its interests.

As EU is a strong defender of multilateralism, hence in strong interdependencies with other global actors, it must also ensure that its strategic autonomy is expressed in a well-functioning multilateral international economic system. That is precisely why, along with the economic measures, the external actions of the EU are of paramount importance in building a stronger strategic autonomy, which can further defend multilateralism. As the former HR/VP Federica Mogherini stated:

“We achieved security through cooperation. We built peace with multilateralism. This is the strength of the European Union” and this idea is followed-up by the European Commission in its priority for “stronger Europe in the world”³¹

As mentioned from the very beginning of this paper, the concept of strategic autonomy also refers to the capabilities of the member states to pursue EU's common goals in relation to the main external actors. And these efforts may be hindered by the emerging US-China bipolarity in the international system and by the bilateral relations of the member states with other external actors, as all global powers have their own economic and political interests, all these aspects are worth paying attention to. The 2021 Strategic Foresight Report, released by the European Commission in September 2021, tackles all the key challenges and shifts in global order in direct correlation with the opportunities advanced by EU's global leadership³². What and when can be delivered remains to be seen.

³¹ The High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini, speech at Hessian Peace Prize Award Ceremony, 20 July 2017 quoted in Elena Lazarou, *Peace and Security in 2019. Overview of EU action and outlook for the future* (Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service, 15 May 2019), 23, https://normandiepourlapaix.fr/sites/default/files/2019-06/EPRS-Study-637894-Peace-and-Security-2019-FINAL%20for%20Caen_lowres.pdf, accessed 20 May 2021.

³² European Commission, “Communication: 2021 Strategic Foresight Report. The EU's capacity and freedom to act”, Brussels, 8 September 2021, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal->

IV. Challenges Posed by External Actors

If in the early days, strategic autonomy rose as a response of Europe’s internal tensions and its dependence on the US, the new global order is forcing a shift in terms of its positioning between the two global actors – US and China – and safeguarding its independence and values from other regional ones, such as Russia. The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the strong interdependencies and vulnerabilities of the EU, especially when in competition with other external actors. In many ways, US is indispensable to the EU, especially in terms of security and defense. However, “America first” has popped up too many times not to have EU thinking about a more balanced partnership with the US, entailing more focus on the European military bases, defense contractors, trade, and investments. Even more so, such a balanced partnership coupled with a stronger euro would favor US in its attempts to stop China’s economic advancement and global influence.

When deciding about the way forward towards increasing strategic autonomy, the EU should consider those fields of action where it can take the lead, such as climate change in order to balance the scales. Even though US is the main trading partner for the EU, with a total value of trade in goods and services of 950 billion euro in 2020³³ and the EU relies on its strategic partner for defense and security, when it comes to the digital realm, things are starting to get more complicated. EU is now undoubtedly dependent on the US on digital and technological matters, calling into question EU’s objective with regards to technological sovereignty.

With China, the situation is even more complex and much more different. Even though in terms of trade, China is the EU’s second trading partner, with a total value of 657 billion Euro in 2020³⁴, China’s new strategy “Made in China 2025” which aims to protect domestic production and lead the world in the technology sector, collides with EU’s objectives on the long term. From digital technologies to medical supplies, EU is dependent on China and its trade in goods, and these are not the only sectors where they are interconnected. The

content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0750&from=EN, accessed 16 November 2021.

³³ European Commission, “Countries and Regions: United States”, 12 April 2021, <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/united-states/>, accessed 20 May 2021.

³⁴ European Commission, “Countries and Regions: China”, 12 April 2021, <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/china/>, accessed 20 May 2021.

immediate EU neighborhood (Western Balkans) is increasingly on China's geopolitical agenda and so is the Chinese investment offensive in what is set out to be an important corridor and gateway to Europe for its new Silk Road (the Belt and Road Initiative).

The slow pace of reforms and the increasingly uncertain domestic context, coupled with the growing influence of external actors and the EU's own internal difficulties and divergent positions of member states have also complicated the international environment. Even though economic by their nature, investments in infrastructure, in particular in transport, energy, and communications, are underpinning China's geopolitical interests in the region by building increased trust and economic dependency on the long term. Even if the Belt and Road Initiative constitutes a core component of China's foreign policy, the Chinese approach in the region is revolving more around economic objectives, while the EU has a more ambitious plan for the Western Balkans region. Thus, the billions of euros to be invested in the region in the coming years, mainly through the Economic and Investment Plan and IPA III multi-annual budget, are targeting long-term strategic investments in key sectors, such as energy, seeking to achieve political objectives: foster peace, stability, democracy, and the rule of law in the Western Balkans.

Even though the ties and strings attached to the WB6 relations with China might have implications for the EU enlargement process, since the investment needs are quite high in the region, EU should take advantage of these investments, while supporting the countries from the region to pursue EU values and standards (environmental standards, state aid, transparency, conflicts of interest, economic debt, etc.). This can be done and is already being done through the various institutional and multi-level dialogue between EU and the WB6. Since both the EU and China will remain significant economic actors in the Western Balkans region, given that economic and infrastructure development represent common objectives, the two are poised to work together for the development of the region, with more efforts being done by the EU in order to ensure that all investments are sustainable and compatible with EU interests, standards, and values.

Although less involved in WB6 economies (only 6.6% of the foreign direct investment in the region comes from Russia, whilst the EU accounts for 61%), Russia has created for itself the image of both an alternative and a protector by serving as the main supplier of gas and energy for many EU member states, not only for the WB6. Europe's overall dependency on Russian gas is set to increase

by 2040 to 150 billion cubic meters per annum, while remaining the cheapest supplier³⁵. As Russia remains the most challenging actor for the EU, on all levels where the strategic autonomy concept must rely on the “act (...) with partners wherever possible”³⁶ part of the definition, this can be seen as an opportunity for EU’s strategic autonomy, an incentive to increase EU’s capabilities. In other words, there is no better argument for a balanced partnership with the US given the risk posed by the increasing levels of Russian influence.

Rebalancing transatlantic relations will benefit both EU on its path towards an increased strategic autonomy and a stronger position in the WB6 and the US who is looking for ways to keep in check Russian assertiveness and advancement in the political and economic realms. All three main objectives of EU on its path toward strategic autonomy (stability, EU standards, and promotion of EU values), are challenged by external actors in some way and to different extents.

V. Conference on the Future of the EU – #TheFutureIsYours

As above-mentioned, EU’s strategic autonomy needs to be based on a cross-sectorial, horizontal principle which cannot be absent from any discussion and debate about Europe’s future. As a defender of multilateralism, EU supports global cooperation and a coordinated approach for issues such as peace and security, climate change, or sustainable development, etc. There is no other better example to assess EU’s commitment towards reinforcing itself as a global actor and taking lead on the global challenges than the roadmap of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

In December 2019, the joint proposal of the European Commission and the European Parliament on the Conference on the Future of Europe was launched. In January 2020, the concept received an interinstitutional mandate and even though it was delayed by the coronavirus pandemic, the closing conference is set for the first half of 2022, with the commitment of implementing the

³⁵ Stuart Elliot, “Russia to remain dominant gas supplier for Europe to 2040: Platts Analytics”, *S&P Global Platts*, 31 March 2021, <https://www.spglobal.com/platts/en/market-insights/latest-news/electric-power/033121-russia-to-remain-dominant-gas-supplier-for-europe-to-2040-platts-analytics>, accessed 20 May 2021.

³⁶ Council of the European Union, “Council conclusions on implementing the EU Global Strategy in the area of Security and Defense”.

recommendations in legislative proposals and/or treaty changes, thus providing the opportunity to deepen the European project. Following the implementation of several adjustments to the Multilingual Digital Platform, the Charter, and the visual identity have been endorsed by the Common Secretariat of the Strategy, setting an official launch date for 19 April 2021. The Conference on the Future of Europe was headed by a steering committee, comprising of representatives of the Commission, the Council, and the seven political groups in the EU Parliament. It sought to discuss all EU's challenges and related solutions on the medium and long term. In order to do so, they argued, the EU must seize the opportunity and address outcomes based on the principle of strategic autonomy.

Building on the statement of the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, that people need to be at the very center of all EU policies, the Conference on the Future of the EU is bound to play an essential role in setting the priorities around the essential topics: climate change and the environment; health; a stronger and fairer economy; social justice and jobs; values and rights, rule of law, security; digital transformation; European democracy; migration; education, culture, youth and sport; and EU in the world, essentially all the topics where EU's strategic autonomy should manifest, as mentioned above. As recent events have pointed out, the subject of strategic autonomy was already raised and discussed with the Commission, European External Action Service, and academia members, during a series of events organized under the framework of the Conference. In fact, the entire series of events to be organized is meant to gather ideas from citizens and civil society about the way ahead, including in terms of strategic autonomy. Key recommendations from these debates will be embedded in the Conference's conclusions.

Additionally, some countries have organized national debates as was the case of the conference “Is strategic autonomy the right EU response to a changing world?”, organized in Poland, by the Chancellery of the Prime Minister, during which discussions were held on three thematic blocks: achieving greater EU independence in strategic sectors; euro as a tool to strengthen the international position of the EU; and whether the EU could benefit from US-China rivalry. Moreover, a non-paper issued by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs after the Conference contained the main conclusions and policy recommendations³⁷.

³⁷ Government of Poland, the Chancellery of the Prime Minister, “Conference on the future of Europe: National events in Poland”. Warsaw, 16 September 2021. <https://www.gov.pl/web/pri-minister/conference-on-the-future-of-europe-national-events-in-poland>. Accessed 20 November 2021.

VI. Conclusions

The concept of European strategic autonomy evolved and adapted over the years from something focused on defense and security to a cross-cutting principle shaping EU's future. Even though building a strong strategic autonomy is a long-term process aimed at addressing EU's strategic interests, this process was rapidly accelerated by the wide-ranging consequences that resulted from the Covid-19 pandemic. Tackling the strategic autonomy as a horizontal principle in all EU policies and fields of action not only reduces EU's existing external dependencies, but also protects the EU from making “compromises” when promoting and protecting its interests and values and enhancing its “soft” power in the foreign and security policy field of action. In an era of digitalization and geostrategic rivalry, European competitiveness in innovation, research, and technology is a source of power in international relations.

Considering this, it can be concluded that building a strong strategic autonomy is beneficial not only for the EU, but for the global power architecture also. Even if there are still internal weaknesses to be addressed – the lengthy decision-making process, divergent positions of the member states – increasing EU's position as a strong global actor with strategic autonomy will reduce EU vulnerability and the member states' dependencies on the two main global actors. From the need to ensure protection for its citizens through health care materials to reducing dependencies in the energy sector, EU is bound to promote trust within and outside its borders, keep its unity and increase its capabilities in order to play an effective role in the re-emerging bipolarity of the international system. As mentioned earlier, EU already proved that it has both the political will and the strategic vision needed to complete this process. After the agreements on the Multi-Annual Financial Framework and Next Generation EU recovery instrument, it is clear that the EU also has the required funds for meeting its objectives and for closing those capability gaps hindering the progress towards a strong strategic autonomy capacity.

The Covid-19 pandemic has many geopolitical dimensions and implications and if anything, it has shown both the weaknesses of multilateralism and the opportunity to mobilize and deliver responses to global challenges. A strategic autonomous EU cannot be decoupled from the global developments or from the transatlantic security dimension. The present research presented only the key

building blocks in what constitutes Europe’s quest for a strong strategic autonomy. The way member states will seize the day, as seen in the Conference on the Future of Europe, and how will EU use the opportunities given by this, remains to be seen.

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