



AN ARCHITECTURE FIT FOR STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

INSTITUTIONAL AND OPERATIONAL STEPS TOWARDS A MORE AUTONOMOUS EU EXTERNAL ACTION

ABSTRACT

This policy paper analyses several institutional and policymaking priorities conducive to a more strategic autonomy agenda for the whole of EU external action. It departs from two different understandings of strategic autonomy: the geopolitical understanding, on which most political efforts have been placed so far, and an institutional/operational understanding, where substantial work remains to be done. The policy paper reviews three recurrent institutional shortcomings for strategic autonomy: the political paralysis at the EU level and the need for more flexible institutional responses; the divisive and often distracting discussions on QMV in the field of foreign and security policy; and a limiting focus on security and defence when it comes to implementing strategic autonomy as a policy priority. The final section provides some policy options to advance the EU's strategic autonomy agenda, in line with its operational purposes, namely broadening the focus of discussions on strategic autonomy to the whole of EU external action; securing the buy-in of member states in processes and policies leading to more strategic autonomy; promoting thematic and regional steps forward in its operationalisation; fostering political consensus at the highest level; promoting a strategic autonomy esprit de corps; and enhancing the institutional tools, methods and capabilities for more strategic autonomy in the field of EU external action.



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1. Introduction

Any valuable foreign policy strategy combines an accurate reading of the global environment, the threats emanating from it, the interests identified by the actor and the instruments at its disposal to secure those interests. The European Union (EU), as a global actor, tends to read the world and its dangers quite accurately, but underperforms when it comes to the last two components of a foreign policy strategy: defining (and defending) its interests, and putting forward the necessary means and instruments to achieve them.

In 2003, the world looked like a safe place for advancing the liberal international order. The European Security Strategy (ESS) (European Council 2003) embodied Europe's normative power and was aimed at projecting the EU's internal achievements to the rest of the world. Europe acted as a 'force for good', although through a different understanding of power than US President George Bush's preference for hard power (and the war in Iraq). The EU was meant to tackle the undesired effects of globalisation and interdependence through the extensive (albeit ill-structured) soft power toolbox at its disposal.

Concepts present in the ESS such as 'effective multilateralism' represented Europe's position as the torchbearer of the liberal international order. While the US was the leader and doer, the EU was the ideological culmination of that order. However, the ESS – the first EU foreign policy strategy – was also criticised for not

clearly identifying the EU's interests (beyond the promotion of its values abroad) and for lacking a coherent foreign policy toolbox, which was instead judged as too disparate and without sufficient implementation capacities.

In 2016, the internal and international crises had turned the EU's conception of the world and its self-reliance upside down. The EU Global Strategy (EUGS) (EEAS 2016) presents a more sombre global environment – with the rise of multipolarity, zero-sum dynamics, populism and transnational threats. It also acknowledges the effects of the euro, refugee and Brexit crises for European integration. The EUGS recalibrates the relationship between values and interests, and it stands as a more realist document. It puts the security of EU territory and citizens at the core of the EU's interests, with the need to further invest in security and defence. The EUGS also aims to foster resilience, cooperation among regional orders, and a new framework for global governance – all of them representing the EU's pragmatic turn.

Strategic autonomy¹ emerges as part of the EU's effort to recalibrate the four components of a foreign policy strategy. As a guiding concept, it has the advantage of responding to a transformed strategic environment and of aligning this with the implementation of specific instruments and capabilities. It stands as a timely foreign policy objective, recognising the new parameters of the global order and transatlantic relations, on the one hand, and the

¹ As a concept, strategic autonomy made its first appearance in the European Council's Conclusions of December 2013, where it was declared that a stronger defence technological and industrial base would enhance the EU's "strategic autonomy and its ability to act with

partners" (European Council 2013). Later on, the European Global Strategy transformed strategic autonomy into a broader objective for the EU by stating that the EUGS "nurtures the ambition of strategic autonomy for the European Union" (EEAS 2016).

need for more robust instruments, on the other.

While the alignment of timely objectives and adequate tools provides an added value to any strategic document, the perils of strategic autonomy can be found in its exceedingly comprehensive nature. The following section will outline two different understandings of strategic autonomy: the geopolitical understanding, on which most political efforts have been placed, and an institutional/operational understanding, where substantial work remains to be done.

2. The two dimensions of European strategic autonomy

Put simply, European strategic autonomy is about having the necessary means to achieve pre-defined foreign policy objectives, while cooperating with partners or acting alone if necessary.² It is about turning a foreign policy strategy into concrete and effective action and relying on the EU's own capabilities. It means collaborating with others on European objectives, while keeping the door open to autonomous action. Securing strategic autonomy takes a more prominent role at a time when others (traditional allies or strategic rivals) do not share the EU's vision and objectives.

As Grevi (2020: 24) puts it, Europe's strategic autonomy is about "expressing a sense of purpose in the world, defining clear priorities, and developing a stronger power base to work with others and respond to threats and challenges". It is a concept that has the advantage of aligning strategic discussions with capability development objectives. It therefore stands as a true foreign policy goal, yet it is precisely in

After a revision of the institutional shortcomings for strategic autonomy in the third section, this policy brief will provide, in the fourth section, some policy options to advance the EU's strategic autonomy in line with its operational purposes. The objective of the policy brief is to identify the institutional and architectural shortcomings and priorities that need to be addressed to make EU external action more fit for strategic autonomy.

its comprehensive nature that its pitfalls reside: it can become a problematic endeavour if the strategic dimension is increasingly contested (internally or externally) or if the development of capabilities does not make sufficient progress.

Strategic autonomy discussions in the EU have tended to combine two distinct approaches. The first, which could be characterised as the geopolitical dimension of strategic autonomy, has guided the political discourse of Brussels-based policymakers and of key European leaders. For example, Angela Merkel declared in May 2017 that the "times in which we could completely rely on others have somewhat passed", while Emmanuel Macron stated in his Sorbonne speech of September 2017 that "in the area of defence, our aim needs to be ensuring Europe's autonomous operating capabilities, in complement to NATO" (Koenig 2020: 2).

A geopolitical understanding of strategic autonomy builds on the transformation of the

² For definitions of strategic autonomy see, among others, Tocci (2021), Lippert et al (2019), Grevi (2020) and Anghel et al (2020).

current geopolitical landscape and the crisis of the liberal international order. It also builds on the distant transatlantic relations under Donald Trump's presidency; events such as the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the return of the Taliban under the Biden administration; China's more assertive role in regional and global politics and security; Russia's vindictive behaviour in its neighbourhood and beyond; and, in general, a global understanding of international politics based on power, national interests and rivalries.

Amidst a changing geopolitical landscape, it is only natural that Ursula von der Leyen (2019) put forward the need to build a "geopolitical" Union at the beginning of her mandate as president of the European Commission, and that High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the Commission (HR/VP) Josep Borrell (2020) urged the EU to relearn "the language of power" when relating to the rest of the world. A more geopolitical EU is the logical response to more geopolitical world politics, particularly when other powers increasingly link geoeconomics with geopolitics, or show their "unwillingness to separate the functioning of the global economy from political and security competition" (Leonard and Shapiro 2019: 6). It is also the logical response when these other powers perceive the US retreat from global security scenarios, such as Afghanistan, as a sign of the decline of Western hegemony and of a weakened transatlantic relationship, in which Europe fails to catch up with its commitments and the US increasingly adopts an 'America first', inward-looking foreign policy.

This changing geopolitical reality clashes with the fact that the EU was conceived as an actor escaping the logics of global power competition (van Middelaar 2021). Today, the EU and its member states may need to adapt

to more complex and contested global realities, but at the roots of their cooperation lies a conception of world politics that transcends national boundaries, fosters economic ties and cooperation, and dismantles the heritage of Westphalian international politics in favour of supranational schemes of cooperation, global governance and multilateralism.

According to a geopolitical understanding, strategic autonomy therefore emerges as a necessity but also as a conceptual hurdle for many member states. Lacking a shared strategic culture and threat assessment at the EU level, or having diverging national foreign policy interests, EU member states often express different views on their geopolitical understanding of strategic autonomy. For Central and Eastern European countries or the Baltic states, which have always relied on the United States and NATO as their basic security guarantee, strategic autonomy cannot be detrimental to a strong transatlantic relationship, particularly when Joe Biden's administration stands by NATO and speaks a foreign policy language closer to Europe's.

When it comes to relations with China, Germany will always take the interests of its industries and export-driven economy into account. Russia is perceived as a strategic threat by its European neighbours, but it has been approached on several occasions by France and Germany to bring diplomatic relations after Crimea to a *détente*. Germany's insistence on building underwater gas pipelines to Russia through Nord Stream 2 obviously limits the capacity of the EU to act with a single voice towards the Kremlin. Furthermore, observing the EU as a guarantor of multilateralism, of openness in global trade, and of interdependence and cooperation, some member states fear that strategic autonomy might lead to protectionism and autarchy (hence the efforts to rename and nuance strategic autonomy through concepts

such as “cooperative autonomy” (Mogherini 2019) or “open strategic autonomy” (Cagnin et al 2021).

The EU is also aware that, in foreign policy, perceptions are as important as reality. In the United States, European strategic autonomy is sometimes viewed with suspicion and as playing into Chinese hands, given its potential to derail a stronger transatlantic partnership that is built under the American security umbrella. However, there is also a growing US trend to support the development of EU strategic autonomy on the assumption that, in a much more challenging world, a stronger EU is of vital importance for the US (Thompson 2019).

With regard to Russia and China, both tend to interpret European strategic autonomy as a progressive departure of the EU from the United States and, consequently, as fertile ground for exploiting internal divergences among EU member states and between these and their Atlantic partner. China seems to show interest in European strategic autonomy on the premise that this would help bring about a misalignment of the EU with the anti-Chinese stance assumed by the United States (Lippert et al 2019; Stec 2021). Similarly, Moscow sees EU strategic autonomy as a potential weakening of NATO and, in recent statements, Russian authorities have welcomed “the EU’s greater independence in international affairs” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2020).

The reinforcement of intergovernmental dynamics in EU policymaking, and the politicisation of EU matters in national landscapes as a consequence of a decade of EU internal crises, nevertheless render a renewed pan-European political momentum unlikely. Short-term milestones such as the German 2021 general election and the presidential elections in France in 2022 add complexity

to any major reform of the EU. There is also emerging consensus at the European Council that a Treaty change should not be envisioned for any time soon, for fear of the results that national referendums may cast. These internal circumstances are coupled with critical voices arguing that, in the end, strategic autonomy should be understood as France’s effort to concentrate European power in its own hands (Järvenpää et al 2019), or that EU strategic autonomy may result in the excessive weight of a limited number of actors and companies, thus putting the EU’s competition policy and open markets at risk (Tocci 2021).

Partly because of external perceptions and partly because of internal disagreements, HR/VP Josep Borrell acknowledges that it is hard for the EU to be a geopolitical union before it becomes a political one (Borrell 2021). Current prospects for the fulfilment of this condition are slim, following years of contestation of the European integration process, both by several member states and within them. The definition of a joint strategic culture, and thus the construction of a geopolitical Union, would require a generous political agreement among member states that looks increasingly unlikely today.

In short, the geopolitical discussions on strategic autonomy are facing internal, external and procedural difficulties. As a result, when European leaders raise expectations of the EU becoming a geopolitical actor (not to mention when they speak about a ‘European Army’), they are often confronted with a shortage of political capital to do so. A revival of Hill’s capability-expectations gap (Hill 1993) epitomises the discussions on a geopolitical Union and, as a consequence, makes the discussions on strategic autonomy hostage to developments in EU high politics. It also hinders progress on the current Commission’s priorities.

An alternative understanding of strategic autonomy puts the development of institutional and operational capabilities for joint action at the forefront. This is a more incremental approach to the concept of strategic autonomy, and it focuses on tools and actions. It also pursues the Lisbon Treaty's objective of advancing a joined-up approach in external action. In a sense, it is a bottom-up approach to strategic autonomy, since it prioritises building up specific capacities to advance the political, top-down objective of constructing a global Europe that is broadly similar to other geopolitical actors. This understanding of strategic autonomy may not appear commensurate with the challenges currently posed by global geopolitics, but it remains easier to achieve than the strategic rethinking and reshuffling that a geopolitical Union would require. It offers two main advantages.

Firstly, an institutional and operational understanding of strategic autonomy offers a way to overcome the traditional difficulties associated with the foreign policy architecture of the EU. These relate to the fact that building a joint strategic culture, which in turn generates a common geopolitical vision, will always be at odds with member states keeping their full sovereignty in foreign policy, security and defence, and with the endurance of unanimity as the main decision-making mechanism.

Political decisions and policy action under a consensus-driven framework are susceptible to the veto power of member states, if not to the temptation of some to act unilaterally or seek bilateral strategic ties with non-EU countries. In addition, these mechanisms are detrimental to a rapid response of the EU to world crises and events, including towards its most immediate neighbourhood. Key to understanding the shortcomings of EU foreign policy and strategic autonomy is the fact that

the EU prefers inclusivity and legitimacy over leadership and resolute action (Lippert et al 2019). This institutional and operational vision of strategic autonomy can help overcome structural difficulties.

Secondly, operationalising strategic autonomy also remains truthful to the spirit of the Lisbon Treaty and the EUGS. The Lisbon Treaty put forward an innovative institutional framework to increase the coherence of the EU's external action, particularly with the creation of the HR/VP position and the European External Action Service (EEAS). But it did not fundamentally alter the policymaking procedures of foreign policy, based on unanimity and consensus, nor did it fundamentally alter the policymaking procedures of external relations policies such as trade or development cooperation, which continue to have a stronger supranational flavour. The EUGS was conceived as an effort to enhance a joined-up approach to the EU's role in the world, enhancing its coherence and streamlining the multiple institutional and policymaking procedures in the area of external action (Morillas 2019). Strategic autonomy, as a central objective of EU external action, has the potential to bridge the institutional differences between EU foreign policy (comprising the intergovernmental Common Foreign and Security Policy and Common Security and Defence Policy) and external relations (where the European Commission plays a bigger role – for example, in trade, energy, neighbourhood policy, development cooperation, and humanitarian aid). So far, strategic autonomy has mostly been operationalised in the areas of security and defence (more on this below), but it is also present in other Commission-driven initiatives, such as the digital agenda, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, industrial strategy, pharma, the single market and foreign subsidies, among others (Grevi 2020).

The following section will review the main limitations that endure in the discussions on strategic autonomy, departing from an institutional and operational understanding of it. The review of these limitations will set the scene for some specific policy options, in the last section. These will be aimed at strengthening

a mindset which, in line with the coherence framework put forward by the Lisbon Treaty and the EUGS, enhances the institutional set-up, distribution of competences and decision-making processes to make them more fit for strategic autonomy.

3. Institutional and operational limitations of strategic autonomy

3.1 Political paralysis and flexible institutional responses

As stated above, a central limitation of EU foreign policy, and hence of strategic autonomy, relates to its intergovernmental, consensus-based process of decision-making. Intergovernmental dynamics in the EU have been reinforced as a consequence of the multiple crises in the last decade. The European Council and the Council have taken a leading role in all stages of policymaking, but particularly when dealing with the most pressing issues of the European agenda, including foreign and security policy. European integration has become a more hierarchical process, with heads of state and government deciding on the most crucial topics, from the refugee crisis to Brexit and the post-pandemic recovery. Often, member states have departed from the EU framework to pursue their national interests. And those with sufficient foreign policy and defence capabilities increasingly pursue their own priorities, and rely on their capacity to act at the expense of common frameworks and objectives such as strategic autonomy.

Together with these institutional dynamics, the contestation by several member states of core aspects of European integration, the rise of Euroscepticism and the influence of populist parties in almost all national landscapes have diminished the scope for a “permissive consensus” on integration and a stronger role of the EU at the global level (Barbé and Morillas 2019). In foreign policy, internal contestation has forced the EU to capitulate on what, previously, would have been agreed positions in Council conclusions. On the Middle East, HR/VP Borrell was forced to issue an informal call on his own to end Israeli-Palestinian military hostilities, due to Hungary blocking a joint EU position.³ Hungary also blocked Council conclusions that accused Beijing of cracking down on democracy in Hong Kong.⁴ Cyprus refused to back sanctions on Belarus unless the EU imposed sanctions on Turkey too, and it was only the European Council that succeeded in overcoming Nicosia’s veto, after the failure of the Foreign Affairs Council to do so.⁵

As a consequence, the EU foreign policy machinery has been forced to adopt more flexible operational mechanisms. With unanimity and

³ www.politico.eu/article/borrell-calls-for-israeli-palestinian-ceasefire-as-hungary-blocks-joint-eu-position/

⁴ www.politico.eu/article/german-foreign-minister-slams-hungary-for-blocking-hong-kong-conclusions/

⁵ <https://apnews.com/article/turkey-europe-alexander-lukashenko-belarus-cyprus-4e5a75706a2ff211e3439cee2f3fa37c>

consensus remaining the general policymaking rule, more flexible ways of integration have been adopted in foreign and security policy. Although Treaty-based mechanisms such as constructive abstention and enhanced cooperation exist, they have hardly ever been used, with the most notable and recent exception of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). Constructive abstention allows the European Council to adopt a decision without unanimity and with up to a third of member states abstaining, on the basis of Article 31.1 TEU. Articles 20 TEU and 326 and 334 TFEU meanwhile establish the way by which a group of member states can lead a process of enhanced cooperation in areas of non-exclusive competence of the EU (including foreign and security policy), as long as others are entitled to join if they so want (Siddi et al 2021).

The desire for inclusivity of some and the decreasing ambition of compromise of others have rather enhanced the use of informal mechanisms of differentiation. Grevi et al (2020) distinguish five categories of informal mechanism of differentiation in foreign policy, the last of them being of specific interest for strategic autonomy. First, regional groups of member states can help advance a foreign policy issue on an area of shared interest. Second, ad hoc contact groups can tackle specific international crises. Third, lead groups can help advance the EU's position on major issues of the international agenda, such as the E3 group on Iran or the Normandy group on Ukraine. Fourth, some member states might advance the EU's position in international fora where not all of them are present, such as the UN Security Council, the G7 or the G20.

Fifth, and more promising among the informal mechanisms of differentiation for fostering strategic autonomy, the HR/VP can task one or more foreign ministers with carrying out

specific foreign policy tasks on behalf of the EU. While this mechanism can help advance an EU position where there is no clear policy line, it can also be implemented to identify operationalisation opportunities in specific policy objectives, such as strategic autonomy. With regard to the policymaking process of the EUGS, former HR/VP Mogherini used her right of initiative to centralise this process, with Brussels-based bodies taking the reins and exerting a high degree of autonomy. This led to the reservation of some member states, which feared an excessive departure from the intergovernmental nature of EU foreign policy during the policymaking process of the EUGS (Morillas 2020). Nevertheless, the entrepreneurship role of the HR/VP, together with the use of flexible and innovative working procedures, provide a way forward to the further advancement of strategic autonomy, as long as member states align with this direction and it becomes attractive for them.

3.2 The divisive (and distracting?) discussions on QMV

Discussions on the use of qualified majority voting (QMV) in foreign and security policy are frequently related to the need to overcome paralysis in policymaking. The current geopolitical context requires more effective mechanisms in order to speed up procedures and decisions, and to make sure that the EU punches its weight in foreign policy matters. If unanimity prevails, so the argument goes, the EU will never be able to achieve more than the lowest common denominator among member states. What is more, unanimity can be seen as a “structural weakness that [the EU's] rivals can exploit to their advantage” (Nováky 2021).

Some analysts believe that the introduction of QMV could be highly beneficial for the EU's foreign policy. Nováky (2021) argues that QMV

would increase the EU's capacity to act, since it would take more than one member state to block a decision. Over time, "closer consultation and co-operation could contribute to fostering a common understanding of the strategic challenges facing the EU, which in turn would lead to a greater willingness to co-ordinate, and a stronger European foreign policy" (Scazzieri 2019). Nováky (2021) adds that the convergence capacity of QMV would be of significant relevance for small countries, which, in order to balance more populous states, would be incentivised to form coalitions. Schuette (2019) adds that member states "likely to be in the minority [would] intensify negotiation efforts, build alliances, and contribute to achieving an agreement rather than being rewarded for obstructionism".

The European Parliament has been consistent in its support for extending QMV to foreign and security policy, while the Commission has also voiced support for adopting more flexible decision-making procedures in foreign policy, security and defence.⁶ Most member states, however, are nowhere near this point.⁷

⁶ In a 2013 recommendation, the European Parliament invited the Commission, the Council and the HR to "envisage the possibility of qualified majority voting on common foreign and security policy (CFSP) matters, as laid down in Article 31(2) TEU, and to formally explore the broadening of qualified majority voting on CFSP matters by means of the respective *passerelle* clause" (European Parliament 2013). These indications were reiterated in both the 2020 European Parliament reports on the CFSP and common security and defence policy (CSDP) (European Parliament 2020a, 2020b). In a resolution adopted in November 2020, the Parliament called "to move to qualified majority voting, at least on human rights or sanctions" by highlighting how this would make the EU's foreign policy "more effective, more proactive and better suited to responding swiftly to emergencies" (European Parliament 2021).

For its part, the Commission too has expressed its support for expanding QMV on various occasions. In 2018, former

EU Treaties allow flexible decision-making mechanisms on the basis of *passerelle* clauses (Article 48.7 TEU), and Article 31.3 TEU states that "the European Council may unanimously adopt a decision stipulating that the Council shall act by a qualified majority" in specific areas of the CFSP, except for decisions with military or defence implications and in cases in which member states exert their right to an 'emergency brake'. These provisions nevertheless remain unexplored because member states have blocked any possibility of moving the discussion forward, although they have agreed to make use of 'constructive abstention' in CFSP decisions.

However, even if member states agreed to move forward and expand the use of QMV in foreign policy, it seems this could potentially trigger negative results. Reluctant member states could adopt an even stronger obstructionist stance towards foreign, security and defence policies, hence undermining the objective of attaining a shared strategic culture at the EU level. Big and populous member states would have additional incentives to sideline the concerns of smaller ones, which for their part would be more

Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker proposed the adoption of QMV in areas such as sanctions, human rights and civilian missions (European Commission 2018). In line with her predecessor, Ursula Von der Leyen in a speech given to the European Parliament in September 2020 invited member states to "be courageous and finally move to qualified majority voting – at least on human rights and sanctions implementation" (European Commission 2020). Even in her mission letter to HR/VP Josep Borrell, the current president of the Commission took the opportunity to reaffirm the importance of expanding QMV by highlighting that "to be a global leader, the Union needs to take decisions in a faster and more efficient way" (European Commission 2019).

⁷ A notorious exception is the Meseberg Declaration of June 2018, in which Germany and France called for the expansion of QMV to the CFSP. (www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/germany/events/article/europe-franco-german-declaration-19-06-18)

fearful of being left out in crucial foreign policy decisions.

More fundamentally, the democratic legitimacy of a core component of national sovereignty such as security and defence would need to be addressed, and national parliaments would probably need to discuss and agree any major reform towards the expanded use of QMV in EU foreign policy. Under the current provisions of the Treaties, the European Parliament, could find it difficult to act as the Council's counterweight (Bendiek et al 2018) and the Commission and the Court of Justice would still have limited monitoring capacities, with the risk that the Union might find itself incapable of addressing situations in which states fail to comply with decisions taken in opposition to their views (Bendiek et al 2018; Scazzieri 2019).

Even more importantly, it is unlikely that geopolitical differences would disappear as a result of a change in policymaking processes. With QMV, national interests and historical differences defining national strategic cultures would persist, meaning that a common EU strategic culture would still be far from reality in the short term. At the very end, major steps forward in the adoption of QMV in foreign policy would require Treaty changes – which, again, require unanimity for adoption. In short, unanimity remains the biggest hurdle for adopting QMV as a rule, and it is unclear whether QMV would contribute to the ultimate goal of strategic autonomy, as understood in its geopolitical dimension.

⁸ <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-12773-2013-INIT/en/pdf>

3.3 A limiting focus on security and defence

As previously noted, strategic autonomy first appeared in the EU vocabulary in the framework of defence documents, back in 2013. The European Commission's Communication 'Towards a more competitive and efficient defence and security sector' stated that "to be a credible and reliable partner, Europe must be able to decide and to act without depending on the capabilities of third parties".⁸ Ever since, the concept of strategic autonomy has been mostly associated with security and defence matters.

Indeed, the conception on which strategic autonomy is grounded can be traced back to the initial steps of the EU's defence policy. The Saint Malo agreement of 1998 and the Helsinki Headline Goals of 1999 provided the political and defence capability development frameworks, respectively. The European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) became the Treaty-based mechanism to execute civilian and military operations, along the lines of the previously established 'Petersberg Tasks'. In addition to operational advances, the EU progressively set up institutional arrangements for the execution of the ESDP, including the Political and Security Committee, the EU Military Committee, the EU Military Staff, and specific mechanisms, such as the EU Battlegroups, which have never been deployed.

Politically, the need for a robust strategic autonomy that goes beyond crisis management gathered momentum with the publication of the EUGS. Of all areas of implementation of this 2016 strategy, security and defence are the areas where most progress has been made (Morillas 2019: 159). To a large extent, this has

been possible thanks to the political drive that the European Council and the Council have given them, starting with the Implementation Plan on Security and Defence endorsed by the Council in November 2016.⁹ Together with EU-NATO cooperation initiatives led by the then president of the European Council, Donald Tusk, the Commission also contributed to the implementation of the EUGS via the European Defence Action Plan (EDAP).

This political convergence made the advancement of multiple initiatives to increase and coordinate defence capabilities possible, providing additional resources and establishing a framework of structured cooperation in the field of defence. The Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), the European Defence Fund (EDF), the Military Planning and Conduct Capacity (MPCC) and the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) are all relevant cases in point. These advances have led some to affirm that “political consensus on strategic autonomy remains limited to one sectoral item – the defence industry” (Anghel et al 2020). Others, on the other hand, are critical that not enough progress has been made in operationalising strategic autonomy in the field of defence – either because some member states still prefer other frameworks for security and defence matters (the US and NATO) or because initiatives such as PESCO include too many objectives that are not strategically prioritised enough, and that lack robust compliance mechanisms (Biscop 2020).

The Strategic Compass, a German initiative launched by the Council on 17 June 2020 and with a view to being adopted in 2022, is aimed at providing a core purpose and strategic direction

to EU security and defence, with the objective of contributing to the “progressive convergence of national strategic cultures” (Grevi 2020) and of overcoming “the stalemate in strategic discussions” through common action (Mölling and Major 2020). The merit of the Strategic Compass also lies in its policymaking process, with regular discussions and consultations at the EU Council. These discussions have the potential to increase the ownership of member states in security and defence matters and to progressively align their priorities under a common strategic umbrella.

Most progress in operationalising strategic autonomy and fostering strategic alignment between member states has thus been circumscribed to the fields of security and defence. Despite strategic autonomy being present in other policy domains, the institutional arrangements and political backing for strategic autonomy, mostly by the European Council and the Council, remain limited. Other dimensions of strategic autonomy have not followed the same process as PESCO or the Strategic Compass, whereby political agreement has preceded specific policy action. Policy areas such as energy, technology and trade would also benefit from regular consultations (both at an inter-institutional level and at the EU Council level), with the aim of expanding the EU’s agenda and prospects for the implementation of strategic autonomy.

To sum up, a series of institutional and operational habits have so far limited the capacity of strategic autonomy to become a driving force for EU external action. First, the political paralysis resulting from recent crises, and from the limitations of unanimity as a core

⁹ www.consilium.europa.eu/media/22460/eugs-implementation-plan-st14392en16.pdf

feature of EU foreign policy, have highlighted the need for the adoption of more flexible operational mechanisms. Yet these mechanisms remain limited, despite the fact that they provide fertile ground for strengthening the EU's strategic autonomy. Second, recurrent discussions on the transfer of QMV to foreign and security policy have been detrimental to a more pressing need – the progressive development of a shared

strategic culture among member states. Finally, discussions on EU strategic autonomy have too often centred on security and defence matters, while there is also room for expanding its use to other policy domains. The following options might shed some light on how to strengthen strategic autonomy for the whole of EU external action.

4. Policy options: towards an external action scope for strategic autonomy

Some say that strategic autonomy has become the EU's new "buzzword" (Järvenpää et al 2019), but the truth is that, conceptually, it has made it to the Union's political imagination, both across institutions and policy domains. Others are convinced of the need to advance more ambitious goals and to rethink what EU 'strategic sovereignty' entails (Leonard and Shapiro 2019) or how 'European sovereignty' can be achieved (Fiott 2021). Be that as it may, the EU needs to capitalise on the concept of strategic autonomy, and to foster the necessary institutional and operational arrangements to do so.

The following policy options can serve the purpose of expanding the use of strategic autonomy while, at the same time, broadening its scope from its security and defence dimensions to other relevant areas of external action. The general purpose of these policy options is to fulfil the mandate of the Lisbon Treaty and the need for a more coherent and joined-up approach of EU policies and processes, in a similar way to the EUGS.

Strategic autonomy might then become an "organising principle to inform and strengthen

the coherence of a vast range of initiatives" (Grevi 2020). Essentially, the mandate of the European Council for a 'New Strategic Agenda 2019-2024' relates to a broader scope for strategic autonomy, calling for the EU to pursue "a strategic course of action and increase its capacity to act autonomously to safeguard its interests, uphold its values and way of life, and help shape the global future".¹⁰ In order to expand the strategic autonomy agenda, the policy options listed below ought to be considered.

- *Broaden the focus of strategic autonomy to the whole of external action.* As was the case for the EUGS, strategic autonomy must be understood as an objective covering the whole of external action. The pre-eminent focus on security and defence has raised suspicions internally (between Atlanticist member states and those that are more integrationist) and externally (with hesitations on the part of the US). Broadening the scope of strategic autonomy might help lower these suspicions, as well as help stay truthful to the leitmotiv of the EU's global role, combining multiple instruments through normative and soft power mechanisms. This

¹⁰ www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/06/20/a-new-strategic-agenda-2019-2024/

will help fulfil the ambitions of the Lisbon Treaty and the EUGS for coherence and a joined-up approach, and it will put forward innovative institutional arrangements in external action. In addition, expanding the number of policy areas when agreeing an approach to strategic autonomy that covers the whole of external action can result in positive sum dynamics between member states.

- *Consider the process of building strategic autonomy across policy domains and institutions as important as the outcome.* In order to go beyond the traditional schism between intergovernmental and supranational processes of foreign policy and external relations, strategic autonomy can help to build bridges between the different institutional mechanisms of external action. Innovating in the policymaking process of strategic autonomy will help achieve a more coherent external action and will help foster consensus across the EU policymaking architecture and institutions. This objective can be achieved via the adoption of cross-policy operational and strategic documents for different areas of external action, from energy to trade, all of them particularly relevant in a post-pandemic scenario.¹¹

- *Secure the buy-in of member states in processes and policies leading to more strategic autonomy.* Strategic autonomy needs to find the right balance between Brussels-based initiatives and the ownership of member states, whose strategic goals are often far apart. While the EUGS resulted in a reinforced leadership of the

HR/VP and the EEAS, the Strategic Compass has been a good exercise for fostering discussions between member states. Regular consultations with and among member states should enable the divergences between national capitals on strategic autonomy to be bridged. Indeed, the buy-in of member states is necessary for the operationalisation of strategic autonomy, particularly when national strategic goals are not aligned.

- *Promote thematic and regional steps forward in the operationalisation of strategic autonomy.* Thematic and regional developments in strategic autonomy will contribute to the success of this policy goal. Strategic autonomy should be applied where it is most needed and where the best capabilities exist. Strategic autonomy towards the neighbourhood, where EU policies are often designed and implemented in a piecemeal fashion, would benefit the most from a cross-policy mindset and actions. The adoption of regional strategic documents drafted on the premise of strategic autonomy and covering multiple areas of external action could be a case in point.¹²

- *Foster political consensus on strategic autonomy at the highest level.* The European Council has been behind most efforts to develop strategic autonomy in the areas of security and defence. This has secured political backing at the highest level and has helped achieve specific operational policies and tools. Expanding this method to other areas of strategic autonomy might lead to similar successful policy developments,

¹¹ Anghel et al (2020) make the case for strategic autonomy covering as many areas (external and internal) as climate and energy, industrial policy, foreign policy, development, economic affairs, monetary policy, defence, international trade, transport, infrastructure, artificial intelligence, research and intellectual property rights. See

also Lippert et al (2019) and Leonard and Shapiro (2019).
¹² Recent discussions on nearshoring have been considered as potentially beneficial both for neighbourhood and partner countries (Teevan 2020) and as a way of managing interdependence by diversifying supply sources in key sectors (Tocci 2021).

as the experience of the Strategic Compass has shown. The 'New Strategic Agenda 2019-2024' can provide fertile ground and impetus for exploring specific advances in other areas of strategic autonomy. The leadership of the European Council, however, must be combined with efforts, across the institutional board, to secure the participation of other EU institutions. Inter-institutional balance will be needed in order to advance strategic autonomy to the whole of external action.

- *Promote a strategic autonomy esprit de corps:* The policymaking for the drafting of the EUGS enabled policy silos to be broken down in foreign policy and external relations. Regular consultations between the EEAS, the Council and the Commission helped obtain a document that, despite lacking political endorsement at the European Council, became the driving force of several external action initiatives (Morillas 2020). In strategic autonomy, it will be equally as necessary to break down policy silos, and mixing relevant teams at the Commission, the EEAS and the Council might prove equally as valuable. By combining policy areas and processes, a longer-term strategic autonomy mindset might also emerge.

- *Consider the appointment of a Special Advisor on Strategic Autonomy.* Appointing specially dedicated senior officials on thematic or regional foreign policy objectives has been a common feature of the CFSP. Special representatives, under the guidance of the HR/VP and reporting to the relevant institutions, particularly the Council, have helped advance specific EU foreign policy objectives. Also reporting to the HR/VP and in regular contact with all relevant institutional bodies, particularly the Commission, the EEAS and the Council, a Special Advisor on Strategic Autonomy would help expand the use of strategic autonomy in external action, as well as help identify the low-

hanging fruit for its operationalisation.

- *Transfer flexible integration methods to policies for strategic autonomy.* The provisions of the Lisbon Treaty have not been used to their fullest extent when it comes to differentiation in external action, either through formal or informal mechanisms. Differentiated integration mechanisms could be used to strengthen strategic autonomy – for instance, welcoming the participation of third countries in particular policies and projects. The departure of the UK from the EU will certainly take a toll on the military capacities of the EU and its global outreach. It also poses a challenge to the cooperation of the EU and its member states with international partners on strategic autonomy, as the AUKUS alliance between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States has shown. Strategic autonomy could, however, serve as a framework for flexible ways of cooperation with non-EU members – particularly those which, like the UK, possess robust foreign, security and defence capabilities. The extent to which the post-Brexit 'Global Britain' objective will enable more UK-EU collaboration on foreign policy issues remains unclear. Instead, intergovernmental, *ad hoc* arrangements such as the E3 grouping on Iran (formed by France, Germany and UK) are likely to remain the basis for further foreign policy coordination between the UK and selected EU member states.

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