

ALESSANDRO MARRONE

European strategic autonomy between ambition and pragmatism

The EU is making progress towards an appropriate level of European strategic autonomy through initiatives that are set to deliver results in the coming years. Permanent Structured Cooperation has reached an impressive number of 60 cooperative projects. Allocations have started of the European Defence Fund's €7.9 billion budget for military research and development. The first drafts of the Strategic Compass have been produced and seem promising on the commitments to be agreed by EU member states in 2022. An appropriate level of European strategic autonomy means being able to deal with crisis and conflicts in regions surrounding the EU while actively contributing to Europe's collective defence via NATO. Although the Union's institutions will make a growing contribution to this, much will depend on the major European countries, given that defence is predominantly an inter-governmental domain. France, Germany, Italy and Spain in particular have the opportunity to move cooperation and integration forward by overcoming the challenge of embracing interdependence and shared sovereignty at EU level. A good balance between ambition and pragmatism will be key in achieving this goal.

Recent developments between ambition and pragmatism

Intra-EU cooperation and integration in the defence field gained increased political traction in 2021, oscillating between ambition and pragmatism. Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) reached an impressive number of 60 cooperative projects, undertaken on ad hoc basis by its 25 participating member states – and with a prominent role for France and Italy. The first annual call for proposals for the European Defence Fund (EDF) was launched within the 2020-27 multiannual financial framework, thus beginning the allocation of the EDF's overall €7.9 billion budget. Meanwhile, the projects financed for a total of €580 million under the EDF's precursor programmes – the Preparatory Action for Defence Research (PADR) and the European Defence Industrial Development Programme (EDIDP) – began to operate and in several cases to deliver results.

In addition to the implementation of these initiatives, which are linked to the 2016 EU Global Strategy, work on the EU Strategic Compass was launched by the High Representative/Vice President Josep Borrell. This featured the strong involvement of both the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the EU member states, particularly those in western Europe. The first draft of the Strategic Compass was circulated in November 2021 and it put forward an ambitious and measurable roadmap to enable the EU to act in the defence field.¹ Meanwhile, European Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen repeatedly expressed her support for greater, deeper and stronger defence cooperation and integration, advocating a pragmatic approach to the ambitious concept of strategic autonomy – a concept advanced by France since 2013.

Pragmatism and ambition have in fact been the two main elements characterising the path of EU defence cooperation and integration in recent years – and this is set to continue in the near future. The balance between these two elements depends on factors both inside and outside the European Union, as well as on the political dynamics within the major EU member states.

Expectations and reality: European army and European Defence Union

Looking ahead, the prospect of a European army is not on the cards, and it would be misleading to focus on it. Indeed, the main priority for Europeans in this field is not to have a single army, but rather to achieve effective military capabilities that are fit for the common

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foreign and defence policy in a broader sense. The national armed forces will remain inescapably dependent upon national sovereignty and political decision-making for a variety of reasons, including constitutional and legal constraints, variegated strategic cultures, strong national identities, and the prevailing political orientation among the electorate, public opinion, and the establishment. This is particularly true in countries where powerful nationalistic parties are active but goes beyond the political currents identified as ‘sovereignist’. It is a reality deep-rooted in European history, geography and society, which should be taken into account.

Similarly, it would be unrealistic to think of a European Defence Union on a similar basis to the monetary union, the banking union or any other aspect related to the single market, where the community method and the *acquis communautaire* prevail. The Lisbon Treaty clearly sets the perimeter of the competencies of EU institutions and agencies such as the European Commission, the European Parliament, the European Defence Agency (EDA),

¹ Calcagno, E. (2021) ‘La Bussola Strategica Ue e l’importanza di agire’, *AffariInternazionali*, 17 November (www.affarinternazionali.it/2021/11/la-bussola-strategica-ue-e-limportanza-di-agire/).

the EU Military Committee (EUMC), and EU Military Staff (EUMS), and it is hard to envisage any major reform in the coming years. All the major decisions on the development of military capabilities and their use in operational theatres, either for collective defence or crisis management, will thus continue to be taken at the intergovernmental level for the foreseeable future. Throughout the history of the EU, the functionalist approach designed by Jean Monnet has worked very well in other domains through incremental binding commitments made by low politics. Since the 2000s, this functionalist approach has also begun to operate in the defence domain, through missions of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and activities of the European Defence Agency (EDA), and more importantly through PESCO and programmes funded by the Commission from 2017 onwards. The EDF is particularly promising as regards defence industrial cooperation and integration, and it comes alongside an increased role of the European Commission through the establishment of Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space (DEFIS), which is currently led by Commissioner Thierry Breton.² However, the limits of this approach have been evident, particularly on the operational side, where member states are keen to retain the maximum level of sovereignty over the use of their armed forces. This is also the case when it comes to capability development, where the intergovernmental framework is favoured far more than the community approach.

Towards an appropriate level of European strategic autonomy

It was against this backdrop that the concept of European strategic autonomy took centre stage in European debates in 2021, despite the concept remaining ill-defined and debated both within the EU³ and at transatlantic level. Briefly, European strategic autonomy in the defence field refers to the ability of Europeans to use their armed forces autonomously – at least in the surrounding regions of the EU so as to pursue their common foreign and security policy. This in turn involves three elements: member states putting effective state-of-the-art and ready-to-use military capabilities at each other's disposal; an industrial and technological base to support current and future development of those capabilities through the procurement, maintenance and upgrade of platforms and systems across the land, naval, air and space

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2 On this role see: Sabatino, E. and Marrone, A. (2020) 'Europe of defence in the new world (dis)order: choices for Italy', Documenti IAI 20/20, November, p. 5 (www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iai2020.pdf).

3 See: Sabatino, E. et al (2020) 'The quest of European strategic autonomy – a collective reflection', Documenti IAI 20/22, December (www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/quest-european-strategic-autonomy-collective-reflection) and 'Strategic Autonomy', *The Progressive Post*, FEPS (<https://progressivepost.eu/dossier/strategic-autonomy/>).

domains; strengthening the decision-making architecture and the political will concerning the joint use of force, in particular regarding crisis management.

The 2016 EU Global Strategy mentions an “appropriate level of strategic autonomy” – a balanced approach that is still valid today and that will be so in the near future. Indeed, when it comes to European autonomy in the defence domain, a crucial distinction needs to be drawn between collective defence and crisis management. In the first case, NATO remains the bedrock of Europe’s deterrence and defence across the conventional-nuclear continuum because of the need for US military might towards Russia – plus the involvement of the UK, Canada and Norway. Indeed, the French nuclear deterrent is totally insufficient to ensure extended deterrence to European allies. And without US involvement through NATO, EU member states are vulnerable to Russian pressure, blackmail and possibly aggression. Even in scenarios of conventional conflicts not escalating to nuclear involvement, the capabilities that Europeans would need to develop and deploy to deter and defend alone against Russia are unachievable without a major increase in military spending and therefore a leap forward of political will.⁴ The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic have already brought a cut to the EDF budget from the €13 billion originally planned to €7.9 billion, and the massive increase in sovereign debt across Europe casts a shadow of austerity on national fiscal policies in the coming years,⁵ particularly if inflation leads to higher interest rates.

With regard to crisis management and stability operations in Europe’s surrounding regions, the situation is radically different in terms of alliances and the capabilities required.

Washington has repeatedly called on its European allies to take more responsibility for the security of their neighbourhood

First, the US has consistently sought to disengage militarily from North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia – from the time of the Obama administration through the Trump presidency and up to Biden’s management of the dramatic US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Washington has repeatedly called on its European allies to take more responsibility for the security of their neighbourhood – including through the command of NATO Mission Iraq, whose command will pass from Denmark to Italy in May 2022. With regard to capabilities, the security environment has deteriorated over the last decade, following the turmoil of 2011, the growing assertiveness of regional powers, and the involvement

of Russia, Turkey and China to fill the power vacuum left by the US.⁶ As a result, operational environments in the wider Mediterranean region are increasingly difficult, with a greater use of advanced weaponry (such as unmanned aerial vehicles) challenging even European

4 See: Barry, B. and Barrie, D. (2019) ‘Defending Europe: scenario-based capabilities requirements for NATO’s European members’, IISS Research Papers, May (www.iiss.org/blogs/research-paper/2019/05/defending-europe).

5 Brustlein, C. (ed) (2021) ‘Collective collapse or resilience? European defence priorities in the pandemic era’, *Études de l’Ifri Focus stratégique* 103, February (www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/brustlein_ed_collective_collapse_or_resilience_2021.pdf).

6 Marrone, A. (2020) ‘Security policy in the Southern neighbourhood – a view from Rome’, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Analysis, March, p. 8 (<http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/rom/16768-20200421.pdf>).

armies.⁷ However, the quantity and quality of the military capabilities of EU member states correspond to the need to cope with the range of asymmetric conflicts in Europe's southern neighbourhood, provided there is the political will to do so. In other words, Europeans can and should take the lead in addressing crisis and instability in Africa and the Middle East which directly and negatively affect their interests and security.

This type of European strategic autonomy should ideally be implemented via the EU, which is able to effect a comprehensive approach across the military-civilian continuum, including for example security sector reform and law enforcement capacity building. Given the reluctance or opposition of certain EU members as regards a more ambitious commitment of the Union, pragmatic formats such as ad hoc European coalitions should be explored and supported. The European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASOH) represents an interesting example of a European initiative led by France and joined by other EU members like Italy which overcomes the CSDP stalemate in the Gulf. Ad hoc coalitions nevertheless also bring several disadvantages to be taken into account – for example, the absence or weakness of politico-military consultation on the rationale and management of operations, which may easily lead to dramatic mistakes and/or a lack of cohesion among partners. Once again, Europeans need to strike a balance between pragmatism and ambition. If a more ambitious EU role is the best option (depending on the circumstances), a pragmatic ad hoc European commitment represents a valuable back-up option in comparison with complete inaction. In this context, NATO can also be an adequate framework to deal with a certain threat or challenge in the EU's neighbourhood, bringing the added value of an integrated military command fit for more robust operations, and bringing also the involvement of the UK. But NATO's involvement will nevertheless require a European politico-military lead, given the current US shift towards the Indo-Pacific.

In other words, and as Italy repeatedly underlines, strategic autonomy is not about being autonomous *from someone*, but about being autonomous *to do something*.⁸ The more realistic the definition of what Europeans want to do, the more possible it is to act through the EU and to develop the Union's capabilities, institutions and strategic culture. Crisis management, stability operations, defence capacity building and partnerships in the wider Mediterranean region encompassing North Africa, the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and the Middle East are all realistic priorities for autonomous European action. By contrast, however, the projection of the EU's influence in the Indo-Pacific would be more effective in partnership with the US and other like-minded

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7 Marrone, A. (2020) 'Italian military operations: coping with rising threats and declining US leadership', IAI Commentaries 20/15, March (www.iai.it/it/pubblicazioni/italian-military-operations-coping-rising-threats-and-declining-us-leadership).

8 In this sense, Italy supports a 'transatlantically sustainable' European strategic autonomy. See: Cristiani, D. (2021) 'Italy positions itself as the driver of transatlantically sustainable European strategic autonomy', GMF Policy Insights, September (www.gmfus.org/news/italy-positions-itself-driver-transatlantically-sustainable-european-strategic-autonomy).

democracies at political, diplomatic and military level. Europe's collective defence can be achieved only through NATO, but the EU can and should contribute in a number of meaningful ways such as investing in military mobility (an area in which progress has been made in recent years) and developing tools to counter hybrid threats that exploit the grey areas below the activation of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty.

An appropriate level of European strategic autonomy, built in partnership with both the US and NATO, is the best available balance between ambition and pragmatism. Indeed, it would fit well with the outlook of several EU member states, including Germany and Italy, and it would also be acceptable for central and eastern European countries which attach the utmost importance to the US and NATO security umbrella. European strategic autonomy that is built in this way would be less divisive and more achievable than the ambitious French view of full European strategic autonomy. Moreover, such an approach would exploit the potential of the Lisbon Treaty's legal and institutional architecture by respecting the aforementioned limitations to the mandate of the EU institutions. Setting a realistic bar for the European level of ambition would also favour the achievement of stated objectives, thus generating positive political momentum among governments and public opinion across the Union. Furthermore, such an approach would be likely to favour more EU cooperation with the US, the UK and NATO, thus generating a better overall output for Europe's security interests – particularly vis-à-vis systemic rivals like Russia and China.

The roadmap: PESCO, the EDF and their linkage

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As mentioned before, member states participating in PESCO have launched 60 cooperative projects in four years – across the land, maritime, air, space and cyber domains. These projects largely focus on capability development in terms of procurement, but they also cover training, exercises, military infrastructure and mobility. It is worth noticing that robust PESCO projects include the development of a European medium-altitude long-endurance drone; a European patrol corvette; a network of space-based sensors to enhance Europe's missile defence; a main battle tank simulation and testing centre; a European medical command; and a capability for cyber electro-magnetic activities.

While France and Italy have been the most proactive countries, leading or participating in 44 and 30 projects respectively, Germany and Spain have also committed strongly on a number of projects. This reflects the fact that these four

countries are the largest military spenders within the EU, as well as the major contributors in absolute terms to crisis management and stability operations under EU, NATO, UN or ad hoc coalition umbrellas. Berlin, Madrid, Paris and Rome have also set up an informal coordination mechanism, cooperating closely with the PESCO secretariat which comprises EDA staff and the EUMS. Looking ahead, such commitment from major EU member states is important to make PESCO a success, given the aforementioned intergovernmental character of European defence cooperation and integration.

In this context, it is important to recall that the 2020 PESCO strategic review approved by the defence ministers of the 25 member states participating in PESCO and endorsed by the European Council⁹ took stock of the initial phase and set up ambitious guidelines for the following five years in terms of both capability development and operational readiness. The 2020 PESCO strategic review introduces commitment on the new Full Spectrum Force Package (FSFP) to implement the EU military level of ambition defined by the EDA Capability Development Plan (CDP) and the Coordinated Annual Review of Defence (CARD). The PESCO strategic review stressed the coherence of output with the NATO Defence Planning Process, but also the different nature, responsibilities and membership of the Union, with a view to an appropriate level of strategic autonomy. Furthermore, the EU members recommitted to addressing persistent gaps in the CSDP missions' force generation, as well as to making deployable formations available to EU missions, and to providing personnel for EU operational headquarters and the Military Planning and Conduct Capability.

PESCO is a crucial element of the EU roadmap towards an appropriate level of strategic autonomy. First, it is expected to develop better joint military capabilities by fostering not only cooperation but also integration and interdependency. Second, it can and should become a catalyst for the operational readiness of European armed forces, and it should prepare EU members for more robust and timely crisis management or stability operations. As in many other situations, the main obstacle lies in the political will of the large- and medium-sized EU member states to live up to their commitments, and to trust each other to agree on a growing level of integration and interdependence. With respect to 2016, important progress has been made and the glass can now be considered half full. Yet PESCO is still far from the spirit of the Lisbon Treaty provision for a core group of EU members willing and able to work together for the most demanding missions and commitments.

It is worth noting that the EDF, as well as its precursors (PADR and EDIDP), represent a watershed for the Commission's role in the defence field because for the first time in Union's history, part of the EU budget is being spent to finance or co-finance military research and development activities. This reflects an evolution in the EU's posture from a 'civilian power' to a 'smart power' that is able to include 'hard power' in its comprehensive approach. Jean-Claude Juncker's promotion of a 'political Commission' and Von der Leyen's initial promotion of a 'geopolitical Commission' are part of this evolution, in terms of the reality on the ground as well as the narrative.

9 General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union (2020) Council conclusions on the PESCO strategic review 2020, 20 November (<https://pesco.europa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2020-11-20-Council-Conclusions-on-PESCO-Strategic-Review-2020.pdf>).

The use of the EU budget also paves the way for further development of the Commission's role in the field of defence as it enables this supranational body to have a say in defence industrial policy, which has strong implications at national level. This opportunity to 'Europeanise' defence and to bring the community method also to the field of defence is clear to the Commission, whose institutional culture is keen to expand EU competences in every policy field. It is not by chance that the Commission has decided to establish a new Directorate-General to manage the EDF, instead of using a delegation agreement with EDA as happened for the PADR. This is particularly important for the future developments of the EDF as a pillar of an appropriate level of EU strategic autonomy.

In addition, the Commission's new role on defence industrial policy brings to the table a rules-based approach, a prioritisation of competition and single market goals, and a technological outlook that is not focused on the immediate needs of the armed forces. Moreover, many of the staff at DG DEFIS have a civilian background – although further recruitment and national secondment has now enhanced the military component of this body, particularly among the French staff. Such an approach plays an important role in the definition of the EDF work programme as well as in the selection of proposals and evaluation of project results – and it will continue to do so.

Although the EDF formally falls within the community method and under the Commission's responsibility, the defence sector remains intergovernmental. The needs of the armed forces are inherently different from those of other public administration departments, not least because of opponents to fighting through the use of force. Security of supply and sensitivity on operational and technological sovereignty inform member states' preferences on procurement, and these preferences are crucial for the marketability of EDF output.¹⁰ Experience in 2021 reveals a strong interest of major and medium-sized European companies in the EDF calls, which was coupled with an important commitment by EU member states such as France, Germany, Italy and Spain to provide national co-funding and support. Building also on the basis of PADR and EDIDP, the EDF has begun to play its role as a driver for defence industrial cooperation across the Union. The results of this are likely to be tangible in the coming years.

Looking ahead, the respective legal bases of PESCO and the EDF will remain different, respectively intergovernmental and community based. Accordingly, each initiative will maintain its own institutional framework and will serve partially different rationales. However, the EU institutions and member states can and should commit to a meaningful integration of PESCO and the EDF to draw the best combined results from the two initiatives. Several PESCO projects – but not all – will be eligible for EDF funding or co-funding and should regularly access these economic resources over the course of the multiannual financial framework. Yet integration between PESCO and the EDF would have broader consequences. For example, a PESCO project can develop shared doctrines, operation concepts, and even requirements regarding certain capabilities, and another related EDF project –

10 Marrone, A. (2019) 'National expectations regarding the European defence fund: the Italian perspective', ARES Comment, No. 42, October, p. 14 (www.iris-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/ARES-42-EDF-Italy.pdf).

maybe co-funded by some of the member states participating in the PESCO project – can develop technologies, demonstrators and even prototypes to meet such requirements.¹¹

In order to succeed, the whole EDF process should take careful consideration of the military point of view. This military view is very likely to be capability-driven, particularly when formulated by the competent EU bodies – including the EDA, the EUMC and the EUMS. It will be key for DG DEFIS to pay close attention to EU military interlocutors as they represent an aggregated military view. It will also be key for the High Representative/Commission Vice-President to fully exert his double-hat authority to bring the EDA closer to commissioners with competences on EU security – for example, the commissioner heading DG DEFIS.¹² In this scenario, a greater involvement of European militaries and the EDA would also ensure greater coherence with the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP). Given that 21 of the 27 EU member states (including 20 PESCO participants) are also part of the Atlantic Alliance, they are familiar with NATO defence planning guidelines and able to find synergies with the related EU process.¹³ This in turn can foster EU cooperation with NATO, the US, and the UK, and advance European strategic autonomy in a manner compatible with transatlantic cohesion, as several member states desire. As the EDF leans more towards satisfying the member states' military requirements, it will pay less attention to dual-use technologies, but the fact that DG DEFIS falls under the responsibility of the commissioner for the internal market will help to maintain a link with the broader civilian sector, notably when implementing the Action Plan on Synergies between civil, defence and space industries adopted by the Commission in 2021.

As member states discuss capability development projects within PESCO, and/or on a mini-lateral basis, in several cases they will involve the respective industrial counterparts from the early phases. As a result, strong industrial consortia with a value chain distributed among EU members are likely to be formed, mirroring the relevant elements agreed by the member states participating in a certain PESCO project. These consortia will thus bid for EDF funding with great chances of success. This in turn may encourage a consolidation of the European defence industrial technological base, towards the formation of European champions that are better able to compete worldwide against continental giants from the US, China and Russia.

Challenges and opportunities for EU members and institutions

With respect to both PESCO and the EDF, particular responsibility lies on the shoulders of France, Germany, Italy and Spain. This represents a political challenge. Paris would need to renounce leading an EU defence that comprises partners whose combined military, demographic and economic weight outpaces that of France. In other words, Paris would need to

11 Simon, E. and Marrone, A. (2021) 'Linking PESCO and EDF: institutional mechanisms and political choices', ARES Report, No. 66, April, p. 14 (www.iris-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/66-Report-PESCO-EDF-April-2021.pdf).

12 Ibid, p. 15.

13 Ibid.

acknowledge that it cannot lead EU defence in the same way as Washington leads NATO, because the US accounts for two thirds of NATO military capabilities while the French budget for conventional defence is below that of Germany. Accordingly, France would need to agree to share Europe's decisions, power, and operational and technological sovereignty with other EU member states that are willing and able to take more responsibilities. This approach is the opposite of that currently adopted by Paris with respect to a number of issues, including the Italian acquisition of the Chantiers de l'Atlantique shipbuilding group, for example – a contract that was cancelled by the French government in a worse way than Australia's cancellation in 2021 of the French submarine procurement in the context of the trilateral security pact between Australia, the UK and the US (AUKUS).

At the same time, Berlin, Rome and Madrid should take a step forward in terms of their political, military and industrial investment in European defence cooperation and integration. From operational deployments in Europe, Africa and the Middle East to the staffing of EU defence institutions, and from PESCO projects to EDF co-funding, these capitals should demonstrate robust commitments and should co-lead the path towards an appropriate level of European strategic autonomy. In doing so, Germany and Italy would be particularly well placed to bring a balanced view on EU strategic partnership with the US, the UK and NATO because they truly believe in the complementarity of the two frameworks and have invested political and military resources in Atlantic alliances – that is, in out-of-area operations and collective defence measures – thereby gaining credibility in the eyes of both Washington and London. A similar call to action applies to other important European countries, from Spain and Sweden to Poland and the Netherlands. Only through a more collective, intra-European burden sharing is it possible to address the security challenges from the EU's southern and eastern neighbourhood.

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While national governments are the main drivers of European defence cooperation and integration, the role of the EU institutions is not marginal. Indeed, it has increased substantially in recent years and is set to grow further in the near future. As mentioned before, the European Commission has acquired a new role on defence industrial policy which is set to increase in the coming years. This can make a difference in supporting cooperation and integration across the demand and supply side of the defence market. The allocation of EU budget for military research in turn enhances the political role of the European Parliament, which is required to ensure political accountability on the use of this budget. Broadly speaking, the president of the European Council and the

High Representative, as well as high-level institutional figures, such as the EDA chief executive and EUMC chairman, can and should make important contributions to this roadmap by bringing together political, diplomatic, military and industrial aspects of defence.

Against this backdrop, the Strategic Compass represents an important opportunity to move towards a higher level of European strategic autonomy. This initiative is meant to de-

tail and operationalise the EU level of ambition in the defence domain by setting priorities and milestones over the next five to ten years as regards operations, capabilities, resilience (including industrial and technological elements) and partnerships. The Compass is expected to be approved by March 2022, and the drafts leaked in November 2021 seem to anticipate a good balance between ambition and pragmatism, including with reference to the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity of 5,000 troops. Provided the final version of the document maintains this balance, much will then depend on the political will of EU member states to implement it through concrete actions in the timeline foreseen, by embracing a certain degree of integration, interdependence and shared sovereignty. Despite the progress made in recent years, and the greater and more positive role of EU institutions, achieving this degree of integration, interdependence and shared sovereignty remains the main challenge to achieving an appropriate level of European strategic autonomy.