

Why European strategic autonomy matters

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Josep Borrell, Haut représentant de l'Union européenne pour les affaires étrangères et la politique de sécurité, fait le point sur l'autonomie stratégique quelques jours avant le Conseil des Ministres des affaires étrangères du 7 décembre 2020 à l'agenda duquel le thème sera abordé en même temps que celui de la relation transatlantique. A n'en pas douter, il s'agit ici de l'un de ses premiers manifestes politiques sur un narratif européen, notre autonomie stratégique, qui sera scruté par la nouvelle administration américaine. Une lecture qui vaut la peine.

THE debate on "European strategic autonomy" has recently given rise to quite a lot of controversies. Let's welcome this debate because we need to clarify the issue, clear up ambiguities and make some concrete proposals on how we can move forward.

Some see in strategic autonomy an illusion that is best abandoned, especially after Joe Biden's victory. Others see in it a political imperative to be pursued more than ever. In between, yet others suggest that we need to avoid old theological disputes and give practical content to these words. I agree with them.

When dealing with the issue I cannot resist the temptation of paraphrasing a great French author, Montesquieu, and his famous satirical text entitled *How to be a Persian* ? "Oh ! To be strategically autonomous, it should be a very extraordinary thing ! How can we be strategically autonomous ?" That is the question.



A brief history of an agreed concept

The concept is not new. In fact, strategic autonomy is part of the agreed language of the EU since quite a long time ago. It was born in the field of defence industry and, for a long time, it was reduced to issues of defence and security. And that is part of the problem.

For quite a while, the debate was limited to a clash between those for whom strategic autonomy was a means of regaining political space vis-à-vis the United States, and others, most of the European states, for whom it had to be avoided precisely for fear of accelerating American disengagement.

“Strategic autonomy has been widened to new subjects of an economic and technological nature, as revealed by the Covid-19 pandemic.”

Since then, strategic autonomy has been widened to new subjects of an economic and technological nature, as revealed by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the security dimension remains predominant and sensitive. Every time I mention “European strategic autonomy” someone raises a finger and asks, “And what about NATO” ?, showing that both continue being seen as opposed. So, let us then recall some basic facts.

The Council already used the concept in November 2013 in relation to defence industry, to strengthen the EU’s ability of becoming a better partner through the development of CSDP. In May 2015, the Foreign Affairs Council used the same terminology. It was further elaborated in the 2016 EU Global Strategy, with a clear reference to “an appropriate level of strategic autonomy”.

The closest we have come to a definition is in the November 2016 Council conclusions. From there comes the expression, “capacity to act autonomously when and where necessary and with partners wherever possible”. And the concept of strategic autonomy has been again by the Council in 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020 and lately, even by the European Council in October 2020 in its wider sense. PESCO and the European Defence Fund Regulation have adopted it too.

Then, one could ask : Why should it be contested now ? Well, the problem is that, in spite of being agreed language, not all the Member States understand it in the same way when used in different fields. This is why, for example, the definition of the conditions for third States participation in PESCO projects was so sensitive and difficult to agree.

Why is strategic autonomy salient more than ever ?

Because the world has changed. It is difficult to claim to be a “political union” able to act as a “global player” and as a “geopolitical Commission” without being “autonomous”. What are then the factors that make this concept more relevant than ever ?

The first is that the weight of Europe in the world is shrinking. Thirty years ago, we represented a quarter of the world’s wealth. It is foreseen that in 20 years, we will not represent more than 11% of world GNP, far behind China, which will represent double it, below 14% for the United States and at par with India.

The next two decades are going to be crucial because China will use them to become the first global power, before becoming itself confronted with new demographic constraints, which will slow its rise. The relay could then probably be taken over by India.

The conclusion is straightforward. If we do not act together now, we will become irrelevant as many have argued cogently. Strategic autonomy is, in this perspective, a process of political survival. In such a context, our traditional alliances remain essential. However, they will not be enough. Since power gaps are shrinking, the world will become more transactional and all

powers, including Europe, will tend to be more transactional too. This is an unescapable truth.

“Today we are in a situation where economic interdependence is becoming politically very conflictual.”

The second factor has to do with the transformation of economic interdependence in which we, as Europeans, have invested a great deal, particularly through the defence of multilateralism. Today we are in a situation where economic interdependence is becoming politically very conflictual. And what was traditionally called soft power is becoming an instrument of hard power.

The Covid-19 crisis has revealed the fundamentally asymmetrical nature of interdependence, and the vulnerability of Europe. Science, technology, trade, data, investments are becoming sources and instruments of force in international politics.

This is a very important change, which should lead us to strengthen all the instruments beyond security and defence, in particular those competences and instruments of the Commission that we have at our disposal, to defend our interests.

Another important reason is the shift in the world’s focus towards Asia, particularly in US policy. This trend did not start with the Trump administration. Let me remind here that while some US forces are still in Europe, the last US tank left our continent in 2013. In addition, as the German defence minister said recently “Only if we take our own security seriously, will America do the same.” I cannot agree more.

“In conflicts like Nagorno-Karabakh, Libya and Syria, we are witnessing an exclusion of Europe from the settlement of conflicts in favour of Russia and Turkey.”

Additionally, Europe is today confronted on its periphery with a certain number of conflicts or tensions in the Sahel, in Libya and in the Eastern Mediterranean. In these three cases Europe must act even more, and alone, because these problems do not primarily concern the United States.

As one Polish scholar wrote, [“the US will no longer be engaged in large-scale military operations in Africa and the Middle East and will leave to Europe crises and conflict resolution in the European neighbourhood”](#).(link is external)

Therefore, we need to close many capability gaps and loopholes and to be present and active in areas where our interests are at stake. In conflicts like Nagorno-Karabakh, Libya as well as Syria, we are witnessing a form of “Astaniation” of regional conflicts (in reference to the Astana format on Syria) which leads to the exclusion of Europe from the settlement of regional conflicts in favour of Russia and Turkey.

Why is this ? How can this be remedied ? Should it be accommodated ? These real questions must be asked within the framework of strategic autonomy. On these issues, the exclusive reference to NATO is no longer enough.

Europeans still have differentiated risk perceptions

Now, in spite of a broad agreement, things become more complicated when it comes to defining the concrete implications of this orientation and the level of strategic autonomy it entails. You can be more or less autonomous, depending on what issues and with respect to which actors.

In addition, I am well placed to know that not all European states see the problems through the same lenses, because they share neither the same history nor the same geography. And as result they do not have the same strategic perceptions.

Even if EU member states generally agree that they face the same risks, the perception of those risks is necessarily differentiated. In the east, in the south or in the southeast, the perception of threats and dangers is not the same. From this point of view, the Strategic Compass that is currently under development will be very important because it aims precisely at harmonizing the perception of threats and risks.

However, the framework we need to define cannot be the expression of the preferences of the most powerful states. Because no state in Europe is entitled to lecture others when it comes to defining the threats and the interests of Europe.

This definition is not an easy task, but not an impossible one if we deal with the problem in concrete and not in abstract terms. For example, there are now French forces stationed in Estonia. Just as there are Estonian Special Forces engaged alongside France in Mali. I am not sure that without Europe we would have Baltic countries present in Africa.

In addition, Nordic and Baltic States who were at the forefront of cyber and hybrid threats have been able to count on the support and cooperation of all other European states and the EU, which has developed a large toolbox. This shows that there is not only cooperation but also solidarity to help each other to address the whole spectrum of threats.

Strategic autonomy and the transatlantic link

When talking about threats, a major issue concerns the relationship of the Union with NATO and especially with the United States. It is a quite sensitive one. However, positions are not as far apart as we may think. I believe the time has passed when the need for a common foreign policy and security was denied, or not taken seriously.

At the same time, no one disputes the vital character of the transatlantic relationship and no one advocates the development of a fully autonomous European force outside NATO, which remains the only viable framework to ensure the territorial defence of Europe.

“Only a more capable, and thus more autonomous Europe, can meaningfully work with Joe Biden’s administration, to make multilateralism great again.”

Since the Warsaw and Brussels Declarations of July 2016 and July 2018, cooperation between the EU and NATO has reached an “unprecedented level” as acknowledged in the London Declaration of Allied Leaders in December 2019. The election of Joe Biden will certainly make the transatlantic dialogue more fruitful.

From the pandemic response to trade, security and climate, or big power games, Europeans and Americans will be working closely together. Only a more capable, and thus more autonomous Europe, can meaningfully work with Joe Biden’s administration, to make multilateralism great again.

That is why the consolidation of the European pillar in defence and security is more necessary. And the pace at which it will develop will be at the heart of the debate on strategic autonomy. Some want to go further than others, because they see it as a political objective that implies a much stronger mobilisation.

In addition, about the Atlantic Alliance, it can only truly work if it behaves as an evolving relationship between consenting and equal partners. That is why I believe that European strategic autonomy is fully compatible with a stronger transatlantic bond and even a precondition for it.

If the relationship between its members is static or unbalanced ; it will end up generating recriminations on both sides. On the American side, there are complaints that the Europeans do not make sufficient efforts to defend themselves. Therefore, American citizens wonder why they should help countries that do not want to spend on their own defence. Who could blame them for that ?

On the European side, some may fear that the price paid for this guarantee may be too strong in terms of diplomatic and military autonomy. They may argue that in exchange for the military protection they offer to Europe, the United States demands, for example, that American military equipment is acquired. In doing so, the creation of a military industrial base in Europe will be weakened.

Nevertheless, we Europeans are managing to make pragmatic progress on that front. We have, for example, just adopted a new regulation governing third-party access to PESCO projects. In addition, we are about to adopt the European Defence Fund with equivalent provisions.

The EDF and PESCO are very good illustration of pragmatic strategic autonomy. Europe is creating mechanisms for cooperation and contributing to the financing of a European program designed to strengthen Europe’s industrial base without undermining Atlantic solidarity. On the contrary, capabilities developed jointly by Member States under those schemes respond also to priorities identified within NATO.

What applies to these projects also applies to major intergovernmental industrial projects such as the Aircraft of the Future (SCAF) project, in which France, Germany and Spain are

participating. These projects are likely to strengthen Europe without harming the transatlantic relationship. Therefore, they need to succeed. This is why the current industrial misunderstandings between partners need to be overcome.

The work on strategic autonomy begins first with us in Europe. If we want to remain somewhat credible in the world, if we want to develop our industrial base, we must necessarily develop a European defence industry that is a component of the European industrial base. We also need to work on reducing our substantial operational gaps.

Strategic autonomy is not limited to security and defence

If I have approached the issue of strategic autonomy at some length under the political-military prism, it is because this is, as I recognised from the beginning, the most sensitive dimension of the problem.

“Whereas in trade, the EU is already strategically autonomous, when it comes to finance and investment work remains to be done.”

However, it is not the only one because the stakes of strategic autonomy are not limited to security and defence. They apply to a wide range of issues including trade, finance and investments. Whereas in trade, the EU is already strategically autonomous, when it comes to finance and investment work remains to be done.

We need to develop the international role of the euro, to avoid being forced to break our own laws under the weight of secondary sanctions and to ensure a much better level-playing field with China when it comes to investment standards. That is why a transatlantic dialogue on China is very useful.

On all those issues, we have started reassessing our tools to make them more effective. This is a big change in international politics. We now have, a foreign investment screening mechanism, reinforced trade instruments, a useful toolbox for 5G and in the next year a better screening of subsidized investments. All those instruments help with the construction of our political autonomy.

This movement has been accelerated by the Covid-19 crisis, because it showed how an issue like health could become a geopolitical issue. As such, neither masks, nor reagents, nor antibiotics are strategic products. However, when produced by a very small number of countries which turn out to be potential strategic rivals, they become strategic products.

And what applies to health product, applies also to rare metals of which certain states control the production or the transformation. Europe therefore needs to diversify the sources of its supplies and provide incentives for companies who want to relocate.

The very recent launching of the European Raw Materials Alliance (ERMA) is a concrete contribution to European strategic autonomy after Covid-19. The partnership of companies,

business associations and governments will secure access to 30 critical inputs by increasing domestic production, recycling, and looking abroad for friendly suppliers.

The list of sensitive materials has more than doubled over the past decade, including rare earth elements joined by lithium, titanium and bauxite. The alliance will focus on the most pressing needs : EU resilience in the rare earth magnet and motor value chain. They are vital to key EU industrial ecosystems, such as automotive, renewable energy, defence and aerospace.

The alliance will address other critical and strategic raw materials needs, including those related to materials for energy storage and conversion . In this regard, the creation in 2017 of the European Battery Alliance of batteries is already producing significant results. By 2025, the EU will be able to produce enough battery cells to meet the needs of the European automotive industry - and even to build our export capacity. This is also strategic autonomy !

Another issue where strategic autonomy is a stake is data. We have achieved a lot through GDPR. But the challenge will be industrial data, and business-to-business data for which there are no satisfactory international regulations. Indeed, in a world where data will be the oil of the 21st century,

Europe cannot have its data left solely to market players or to have it confiscated by states whose protection of liberties is not an absolute priority. There is a true European model in an area that must prevail. A European voice must make itself heard.

Conclusion

Strategic autonomy is not a magic wand but a process, a long-term one, intended to ensure that Europeans increasingly take charge of themselves. To defend our interests and values in an increasingly harsh world, a world that obliges us to rely on ourselves to guarantee our future.

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Le monde change, tous les jours, peut-être plus vite que jamais, mais la puissance reste. La puissance reste, mais elle change elle aussi, tous les jours, dans ses modalités. Pourtant, il y a des fondamentaux. Lesquels ? C'est ce que vous allez découvrir et comprendre. Ainsi, vous marquerez des points. Des points décisifs à un moment clé.



P.-S.

Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the European Commission.