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Strategic autonomy of the European Union: reality or utopia? A critical analysis of its main dimensions and obstacles[1]

Abstract

The European Union is facing an unstable geopolitical context marked by new global challenges and threats that underline the need to provide it with strategic autonomy. To this end, an action plan called "Strategic Compass" has been adopted, which aims to increase Europe's strategic autonomy in the field of security and defence. However, this work is being hampered politically, industrially and operationally, mainly due to the lack of a strong concept of strategic autonomy, the difficulty of joint strategic planning, the impossibility of aligning strategic cultures in the short to medium term, and the existence of different needs and asymmetric resources. The result is a gap between expectations and reality that may undermine the EU's ability to emerge as a strong geopolitical actor on the international stage.

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Keywords

Strategic compass, European security and defence, political dimension, operational dimension, industrial dimension.

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1. Introduction

One of the big questions facing the EU is how it intends to deal with the current geopolitical scenario and whether the new strategy it adopts will position it favourably on the international stage. Existing literature on the subject tends to focus on what it should be rather than what it actually is. This creates a large gap between expectations and reality that poses a serious danger to Europe's geopolitical positioning. There is a risk of failure that could have serious consequences for the EU's capacity development, making it appear less useful as a partner on the international stage.

Strategic autonomy is currently in the midst of a great debate marked by a confused use of the term at the political, diplomatic and civic level. The most recurrent slogan is: the European Union needs greater strategic autonomy, but it doesn't ask, what does strategic autonomy really mean? Is it possible in the current European framework, does it limit or complement state sovereignty, what is the appropriate level of strategic autonomy and how much leeway are individual member states willing to give?

To provide clarity, a solid concept must be formulated in line with the current geopolitical context. This arduous task is hampered by a number of structural drawbacks that occur in various strategic autonomy dimensions and that are difficult to overcome in the medium to long term. This study therefore aims to clarify and simplify the concept by analysing its different domains: the political, operational and industrial dimensions. The aim is to detect the origin of each obstacle that impedes true strategic autonomy and to understand the interrelationships implicit in each of them.

2. Strategic autonomy as an abstract and undefined concept

In the current unstable geopolitical context where the law is losing effectiveness due to violations of the structural principles of international law (De Castro, 2023), and power dynamics are a rising global trend, adopting a strategy in favour of achieving strategic autonomy is becoming key to European survival on the current international stage. To achieve it, a solid concept of European strategic autonomy must be defined as a fundamental basis for gaining greater relative power on the international stage. Its great breadth, lack of definition, diversity of interpretations and the existence of evasive policies make this task difficult. The lack of a definition of the concept is mainly due to the different visions of the different member states regarding strategic autonomy; this has resulted in escalating tensions within the organisation itself, leading to suspicions that it is impossible to conceptualise unanimously. This idea is expressed in the Issue Paper of 5 February 2021 of the Council of the European Union entitled "*Strategic Autonomy, Strategic Choices*" (Council of the European Union, 2021), where, after analysing it as an impossibility, it proposes reaching a "common understanding tied to the *international* context" as an alternative to defining a concept.

Another factor that is an obstacle to obtaining a concept of strategic autonomy is the difficulty of carrying out joint planning between the Member States, which leads to the appearance of a "strategic cacophony" (Fojón, 2021). This occurs due to a lack of shared needs and asymmetrical resources. Accordingly, the concept of strategic autonomy will depend on the interests and threats faced by each state, and on the different relationships between Member States and other geostrategic actors (Bartels et al., 2017), without forgetting that the concept of strategic autonomy would force the concept of sovereignty of each country to be redefined. This is a major obstacle to overcome because sovereignty is not a sliding scale: either you have it or you don't (Rudolf, 2022).

To find a solution to this problem, the European Council document of 21 March 2022, entitled "[A] Strategic Compass for Security and Defence - For a European Union that protects its citizens, defends its values and interests and contributes to international peace and security", was adopted at a European level. However, it should be stressed that strategic autonomy is not strictly a creation of the European Union (Suárez et al., 2017), and originally dates back to the drafting of the 1994 French Defence White Paper (Mauro, 2018). In line with this, France is currently the Member State most committed to developing European strategic autonomy. This raises the suspicion that this initiative has a multiplier effect and added value for the French nation and could be the reason why the Germans are reticent[2] about the initiative.

3. Capacity for action as an indispensable feature

The capacity to act plays an essential role in confirming the existence of true strategic autonomy. This quality is what makes international subjects relevant actors in the international sphere, defined as those who act and possess the effective capacities to influence international relations in a significant way (Calduch, 1991: 2-7). Furthermore, the status of international actor is not static, an actor may lose or acquire it, given that it is subject to how international events evolve (Marrero, 2012). It must not be a one-off capacity, but one that lasts over time, demonstrating a certain continuity[3], as García expresses, "no actor is eternal" (1992: 29). The idea of dynamism around actor status has been and is present in the historical evolution of Europe. It should be recalled that, after the Balkans and the resurgence of the Kosovo conflict, the credibility of European action was in decline. In response to this, and due to a llack of political will, the Franco-British Summit in Saint Malo was adopted in 1998, and what was agreed was transferred to the Cologne European Council in 1999. This brought about greater

2 Germany has been reluctant to conceptualise the notion of strategic autonomy; this is borne out by a lack of definition in its Defence Books, with the exception of its 2016 Defence Book, where it only covers some of its dimensions. This issue was already addressed by France in its 1994 Defence White Paper.

3 Initially, the international players in the nuclear arms race were the United States, Britain, France and the Soviet Union. But, as international relations progressed, other actors such as Israel, Iraq and Pakistan also joined (Marrero, 2012).

proximity between positions, and began the process of building the ESDP (Corio, 2003), led to the emergence of new institutional structures and started the process of capacity building outside treaties (García, 2019a: 63). This led to the declaration of operability (2003) and the deployment of European missions, within a short period of time (Martín, 2014). As a result, in a short period of time, the EU became an actor with a certain but modest capacity to act (Díez and Puig, 2019). On the international stage, the great dissociation between the political, military and economic spheres is visible in the existence of two strands: the intergovernmental strand, where common foreign and security policy and foreign security and defence policy are integrated, and the communitarised strand. As a result, foreign, security and defence policy is dominated by institutions that represent the direct interests of the Member States: the Council of the Union and the European Council, which must be unanimous, except in exceptional cases, to adopt decisions.

The European Union is establishing itself as an international actor in the civil sphere, seeking to play an important role in the protection of democracy and the welfare state. However, there is a different picture in the field of security and defence, because the CSDP is integrated into the intergovernmental side, becoming a fundamental element of each country's sovereignty (Mangas, 2004). To this effect, Felix Artega states: "The definition of European strategic autonomy forces us to redefine the concept of the sovereignty of each country". Sovereignty is made up of several fundamental elements: borders, currency, foreign policy and defence (Mangas, 2004: 142-143). These elements, with the exception of defence, have been gradually communitised, leading to greater reluctance to cede competences in this area. This is visible at the European institutional level, given that, in security and defence matters, there is a quasi-absolute predominance of the Council of the European Union and the European Council through a system of unanimous decision-making, although constructive abstention is allowed. Preventing the transfer of competences has been present throughout the evolution of Europe.

This affection for sovereignty and state interests means that the task of promoting true strategic autonomy must fall to the Member States themselves (Pontijas, 2019: 10-15). As a result, the European Union is made up of distinct and equidistant security ecosystems. This raises the question of how the EU is to be configured as a "strong and coherent political actor", while recognising the specific character of security and defence policies in specific EU Member States, especially in the absence of a centralised authority that can regulate asymmetry between the priorities and threats of different Member States. For all of the above reasons, in the field of security and defence, the European Union is often described as a political subject that is difficult to classify (Suárez et al., 2017).

In order to confirm that it really has the capacity to act in the field of security and defence, this status should first be recognised by Europeans themselves. In other words, the EU must be identified as a global actor, thereby developing what the Strategic Compass calls a "common security and defence culture". And the other strategic actors must also recognise its status. Internal and external recognition is therefore

necessary, especially when projecting force abroad is the key to achieving European and international security.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine shows how the lack of a real European deterrent undermines Europe's ability to act on the international stage. The EU has never shown a strong response, appearing to be a weak security and defence organisation in the international sphere. Vladimir Putin's disquiet over Sweden and Finland's possible NATO membership exemplifies the Russian leader's concerns, threatening "serious military and political repercussions". Russia is not perturbed by Sweden's and Finland's membership of the European Union. This is a matter of concern given that both the Washington Treaty, which established NATO, and the Treaty on European Union, articulate a mutual defence clause whereby if one member of the former organisations suffers armed aggression on its territory the others must assist it. The difference between the two clauses lies in the intensity of the aid, with the aid referred to in the EU Treaty being more forceful. The fifth article of the Washington Treaty states that, in the event of an armed attack, the parties shall assist the party that has been subject to an armed attack "by such measures as it deems necessary", while Article 72 (paragraph 7) of the TUE states that they shall assist "by all the means in their power". This suggests the lack of a deterrent in the mutual protection clause in the TEU, given that Sweden and Finland were already under the umbrella of EMU protection. It is important to point out that NATO and the EU are different organisations in nature, objectives, commitments and evolution (Rodriguez, 2019: 224). NATO is a partnership based on military cooperation between European and North American countries with the aim of ensuring collective security and mutual defence. Meanwhile, the EU is an economic and political association composed of Member States with the aim of achieving a greater degree of economic, social and political integration and cooperation (Macorra, 2014).

4. Dimensions of strategic autonomy in the field of security and defence.

Strategic autonomy in the field of security and defence, as described above, is divided into three fundamental dimensions: political, operational and industrial. This division, agreed in the academic world and first set out in the 2013 *French White Paper on Defence and National Security* (Arteaga, 2016), aims to shed light on the lack of a definition of the concept. Relationships are established between the dimensions that may in practice make it impossible to achieve strategic autonomy. The absence of any one of them would be tantamount to asserting a lack of strategic autonomy.

There should be no hierarchy or supremacy between the three dimensions; they must be coordinated, concurrent and proportional. This is a practical problem faced by the European Union because, depending on the actor and the moment, some dimensions take precedence over others, making it difficult to reach a common concept of strategic autonomy (Arteaga et al., 2007). The 2003 Headline Goal (Battlegroups), for example, prioritised operational autonomy over political and industrial autonomy.

4.1. Political dimension

The political dimension encompasses strategic planning, defined as "the logical framework in which the actions of states related to the use of all means of national potential or that of a coalition of states are integrated" (Arteaga et al., 2007: 20). It is a path that ensures the availability of resources and establishes clear policy instructions. This means that through planning, objectives and capacities are established (Quesada, 2022).

Strategy is therefore part of strategic planning and is therefore integrated into the political dimension of strategic autonomy in terms of defence. Strategy could simply be defined as "the art of planning and directing with the aim of achieving a specific end" (Real Academia Española, 2021). However, this element must necessarily be accompanied by a strategic culture, otherwise the overarching goal set out in the Strategic Compass - to achieve a common security and defence culture - would be unattainable. Achieving this objective is held back by the different visions within the EU: Atlanticist and Europeanist, multilateralist and sovereigntist, pro-force and pro-prevention (Iglesias et al., 2020) and by the differences between the strategies of the Member States. For example, a comparison between the French Defence and National Security White Paper and the German Defence White Paper shows how their strategies diverge. While France is committed to a strategy based on nuclear deterrence and external projection (Arteaga et al., 2007), the German strategy proposes closer relations with multilateral structures. Similarly, it should be recalled that European strategic autonomy before Russian aggression was geared towards greater independence in terms of security and defence with the transatlantic link. At this point it is important to recall the impact of the Trump administration's position in multilateral fora on defence matters, in which the transatlantic link was challenged, mainly on the basis of the MS's failure to meet their commitments to defence funding (Rodríguez, 2022). At the same time, the US's shift in strategic focus to the Indo-Pacific has resulted in different responses and positions from the MS, generating the image of an "*uncoordinated Western world*" (238). The political dimension is therefore affected by the effects of cohesion and the EU's capacity to articulate unified planning and its projection at an international level.

In this vein, Alan Macmillan argues that "security and defence decisions are not an abstract construct but are influenced by identity and cultural elements" (Macmillan, 1995: 34). This argument highlights the difficulty of arriving at a common concept of strategic autonomy, at least in the short term, as there needs to be an alignment between the strategic cultures of the different Member States. Rodney argues that strategic culture is influenced by several elements: geographical, historical-cultural and social (2006), which are difficult to align in a short period of time. For example, there is a different approach to the use of military coercive power (Centro Superior de Estudios de la Defensa Nacional, 2004). This largely conditions the participation of MS in crisis management operations where there is suspicion about the need to use force.

To this effect, the Strategic Compass expresses this concern by referring to "the need to get closer to a common strategic culture" and can be considered a step forward in achieving the future convergence of the Member States, but it does not have the elements needed to be classified as a true strategy in the field of security and defence. Firstly, as an organisation made up of different security ecosystems, it should present an analysis of the risks, interests and objectives of the 27 MS. Secondly, it sets out a series of values, but does not define or rank them, and this has implications for capacity building. Thirdly, it does not mention how to deal with the specific threats it lists, nor does it explicitly state when the use of military means would be lawful, nor does it define which threats are intolerable and what are the limits to the use of force, among other aspects.

It is therefore a strategic reflection but not a strategy in itself. This, together with a security and defence policy that does not coordinate the common action of the MS and lacks military doctrine, undermines their effective capacity for action. Added to this is the risk of trying to make progress through capabilities without having a clear strategy and, a result, subordinating strategic actions to the existence of available capabilities and not vice versa.

An additional problem is the question of who would take the lead. All indications are that leadership should be by the more powerful Member States, considering their public expenditure on defence: France and Germany. However, a shared leadership between the two powers would cause a great deal of friction and tension, and could cause further internal fracture.

The elements that currently hinder European strategic planning in the field of security and defence are mainly a lack of: strategic anticipation, reactivity, political leadership, political willingness to act (Habermas, 1970), and the absence of a European military doctrine (Fatjó et al., 2005: 46-48), plus strategic shortcomings due to the lack of a permanent European headquarters. These final shortcomings lead to two possible scenarios: either the Berlin+ mechanism, with General Tod D. Wolters of the United States Air Force, in his capacity as Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) exercising strategic and operational planning, or the EU could adopt a "framework nation" solution (Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2010), i.e. a MS could provide its national headquarters for operations adopted at the European level. Seeds of hope for a future permanent headquarters are currently pinned on the Operations Centre (OPCEN), dubbed the "embryo of European defence integration". However, it differs from a strategic headquarters because it is being created with a supranational vocation and not inter-state cooperation (Regalado, 2013). Once again there is disagreement over its creation. For example, France favours its rapid implementation, while Germany has pointed out that it duplicates NATO assets, a line followed by non-EU states such as the United Kingdom (Meiker and Brooks, 2021: 29-30).

The lack of strategic foresight is primarily due to the fact that the European Union is an organisation based on the voluntary association of Member States. As a result, and in the absence of centralisation in the field of security and defence, strategic planning is difficult because of the differences between Member States in this area and a lack of

planning continuity. Both modalities have been used in a number of EU operations. For example, the EUFOR Althea 2004 mission used the Berlin+ mechanism, while Operation Arthemis was largely conducted under French strategic planning with French troops. The lack of a permanent European operational headquarters subordinates EU action to the will of the Member States, as occurred with the UN mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1999, where Germany's unwillingness to participate delayed the planning and launching of the mission. Twenty-two years have passed since then and the European Union has still not been provided with this resource.

Furthermore, the lack of reactivity is due to the need for unanimity in security and defence decision-making, as stipulated in the European treaties. The case is that most of the objectives set out in the CSDP are current needs and cannot be subordinated to results over the course of a few years.

4.2. Industrial dimension

The industrial dimension is a strategically important sector focused on the supply of goods and services for defence. Therefore, it is the equipment side. The goal is to acquire strategic industrial autonomy, defined as the ability of Member States to produce necessary defence systems and not be dependent on other international actors. The EU shows greater concern over areas related to foreign technologies and imports (Martí, 2018), particularly in the area of armaments. This dimension, as Javier Solana states, is fundamental, as capabilities are subordinate to the very existence of resources (Esteban et al., 2021).

To ensure the industrial dimension develops, it is necessary to strengthen investment and cooperation between the Member States, reinforced by the possibility of joint procurement of equipment. This is because the gaps in the industrial field need to be filled jointly by the different MS. To guarantee the supply of goods and services, innovation and research must be able to adapt equipment in line with developments.

The European defence market is cross-cutting and oversized, and there is frequent duplication due to a lack of cooperation, especially in the area of armaments. MS prefer to rely on domestic supply (Gónzalez and Fonfría, 2019) or from foreign companies or international suppliers rather than supplying through another MS.

Another obstacle to achieving industrial autonomy in security and defence can be seen by analysing the equipment acquisitions of the main European military powers, which follow two recurrent patterns of behaviour: either the Member States opt for domestic supply or they mostly acquire equipment through the United States, excluding infantry equipment.

Current examples of this include France and Germany's acquisition of US-made C-130J aircraft instead of the European-made A400M, or the acquisition of the US-produced ESSM missile by several Member States (Martí, 2018), or Germany's procurement of US F-35 fighter jets instead of acquiring the Eurofighter in March

2022 (Valero, 2022). The possible sale of the electromagnetic spacecraft launch system (EMALS) to France is currently under discussion (Navarro, 2022).

Another difficulty is the lack of investment. In this regard, the European Defence Agency, in the paper *Defence Data 2019-2020*, argues: "defence investment and defence equipment procurement, spending on collaborative projects does not seem to be a priority for most MS", given that only 11% of equipment procurement was achieved within the European framework" (European Defence Agency, 2021).

To solve this problem, as expressed in the Strategic Compass, the EU must strengthen its industrial and technological base to achieve greater efficiency and cooperation so that "European industry becomes the norm" while innovating to gain greater resilience in this area (Council of the European Union, 2022). Achieving these goals requires boosting defence innovation, as stated at the annual conference of the European Defence Agency (Gomes et al., 2021). There are a number of problems:

1. According to defence data provided by the EDA, Member States spend almost 83% of defence expenditure on equipment procurement, compared to approximately 17% on research and development.

2. Another problem highlighted by Csernatoni is the lack of public debate on this issue (2021), and the lack of technology and industrial integration (Oliveira and Küsters, 2019). This concern was expressed by the European Parliament which stated: "security and defence research was being conducted in the service of industry and not citizens"[4] (2012). In other words, problems related to democratic governance could arise. This would result in a failure to acquire a common security and defence culture (Marsal, 2016), in the absence of public debate.

3. Problems related to democracy and citizen transparency could arise from the lack of public supervision of European security and defence research (Csernatoni, 2021).

4. Controversy over which areas to invest in and research, based on the disparate security and defence needs of each MS. For example, different battle tank requirements: France needs lighter tanks for intervening in North Africa as this favours mobility while, in contrast, Germany advocates the production of heavy tanks because its forces are destined for continental warfare in Europe (Institut Français des Relations Internationales, 2020). In the air sector, the same pattern was repeated between the major powers when producing the Tiger attack helicopter; production had to be adapted to the different needs of the French and Germans, producing two very equidistant versions (Pulido, 2020).

To achieve strategic autonomy, industrial capacities must be developed and, to this end, industrial collaboration and cooperation is essential to overcome current

4 Seventh Framework Programme of the European Community for research, technological development and demonstration activities (FP7). (2012, 28 November). Available at: https://cordis.europa.eu/programme/id/FP7/es. [Accessed: 12/05/2023].

protectionism. These areas include the A400M and Eurofighter projects. However, "this cooperation is a double-edged sword, given that it generates a long-term monopoly" (Gonzaléz and Fonfría, 2019) through the use of consortia where each MS, depending on its contribution, will hold a certain percentage and power.

Although there are serious problems in the European defence market, the European Union has implemented initiatives to alleviate them. First, the Organisation for Joint Armaments Cooperation (OCCAR) was created at the European level, the European Defence Agency was created in 2004, the possibility of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) was introduced (García, 2019b), the European Defence Industrial Development Programme (EDIDP) in 2017, the European Defence Fund and the Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space (DEFIS) were created in 2021 (Artega and Fojón, 2007), as well as numerous European Union research and technological development framework programmes (FP1 to FP9).

4.3. Operational dimension

The operational dimension refers to the capacity for autonomous action closely linked to military strategic planning and capability development procedures in order to achieve operational autonomy (Pachucki, 2020). It is important to point out that the idea of defence associated with capabilities is not a new idea, but was already present in the Helsinki objectives in 1999, before the European Union articulated a foreign policy (González, 2003), through the provision of civilian and political instruments aimed at generating and evaluating capabilities (Arteaga, 2010). This need was made visible even earlier, for example, in the Gulf Crisis in 1991 (Attinà, 1991) and the African Great Lakes Crisis in 1998 (Guerrero, 2007). Specifically, following the Franco-British Saint Malo Declaration in 1998, endorsed by the Cologne European Council in 1999 (Arteaga, 2010), the process of building the European Security and Defence Policy began and, for the first time, a process of generating new capabilities for international crisis management at the service of the European Union was set in motion (García, 2019a). Subsequently, and in response to the capabilities objective defined at the 1999 Helsinki European Council (Casajuana, 2004), this need was reflected in the 2003 Security and Defence Strategy[5] (ESS) and in the 2016 Security Strategy[6] (Alaminos, 2018). In the same year, the European Defence Action Plan (EDAP)[7] was adopted with the aim of boosting capability development and increasing the efficiency of defence spending (Álvarez, 2018). Along these lines, the Capability Development

5 European Security Strategy. A secure Europe in a better world. 2003. Available at https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/30808/qc7809568esc.pdf. [Accessed: 20 November 2023).

6 A Global Strategy for the European Unión´s Foreign And Security Policy. 2016. Available at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf. [Accessed: 20/11/2023].

7 European Defence Action Plan: towards a European Defence Fund. 2016. Available at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/IP_16_4088 on 20 November 2023).

Plan[8] (European Defence Agency, 2018) was adopted in 2018, highlighting the importance of planning for generating new capabilities. Finally, the 2022 Strategic Compass document[9] took place, with the background of the Versailles Declaration[10] on reinforcing European defence capabilities.

This confirms the creation of capacity building as a key issue for the European Union, which is aware of the need for a new impetus in the field of capacity building and further strategic planning. It is important to qualify that the EU's geostrategic concern arises not from its lack of capacity to act, but from the way in which the EU chooses to use the capabilities it possesses (Youngs, 2021).

There needs to be a synergy between both elements, given that "the important thing is not to have capacities but to know what they are needed for" (Arteaga, et al., 2017). This means that the first step is to define strategic needs and then generate capabilities, bearing in mind that there are no European or shared ownership capabilities (Centro Superior de Estudios de la Defensa Nacional, 2004), but rather, on the basis of a voluntary partnership, the capabilities and means are owned by the Member States, which will voluntarily place them at the disposal of the European Union (Institut Francais des relations internationales, 2020). In this area, and in view of the different defence spending percentages, it is logical that in the operational sphere, those who can contribute the most have the greatest decision-making weight. Therefore, defence spending percentages can be seen as a proportion of total public spending: France spends 3.24% [11], Germany 3% and to a lesser extent Italy spends 2.42%.[12] This faces the fact that "the mere suspicion of instrumentalising the European Defence Policy to support its own defence industry considerably weakens long-term cooperation and casts doubt on the sincerity of the official discourse" (Institut Francais des Relations Internationales, 2020: 27).

In this regard, at the operational level, the Strategic Compass focuses European needs on the acquisition of next generation capabilities, cutting-edge military capabilities and interpretive defence capabilities.

8 Capability Development Plan. European Defence Agency. Available at https://eda.europa.eu/docs/default-source/eda-factsheets/2018-06-28-factsheet_cdpb020b03fa4d264cfa776ff000087efof. [Accessed: 20/11/2023].

9 A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence: for a European Union that protects its citizens, defends its values and interests, and contributes to international peace and security. 19 April 2022. Available at https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7371-2022-COR-1/es/pdf. [Accessed: 20/11/2023].

10 Versailles Declaration: Informal meeting on 10-11 March 2022 on Russian aggression against Ukraine as well as on strengthening defence capabilities, reducing energy dependencies and developing a stronger economic base.

11 Data have been extracted through Macro Data. Available at https://datosmacro.expansion.com/estado/gasto/defensa/francia). [Accessed on 28/03/2023].

12 Data have been extracted through Macro Data. Available at https://datosmacro.expansion.com/estado/gasto/defensa/italia. [Accessed on 28/03/2023].

5. Notes on the Strategic Compass

The Strategic Compass is an ambitious action plan in the shape of an essentially geopolitical document that is intended to be a guide to enhancing the EU's strategic autonomy in the field of security and defence. In other words, to establish the European Union as a provider of security in the international sphere in the next ten years. It is a document that had been in preparation for approximately two years and was finally approved on 21 March 2022. It took two years to carry out a study of the European situation prior to the Russian invasion. The invasion took place on 24 February 2022. Consequently, barely a month was available to include and adapt the Strategic Compass to the impact of the Russian invasion on European security and defence, although regular reviews are planned. This could explain, as several authors argue (Rupert, 2022), the French interest in giving momentum and speed to the initiative, with the aim of having the Strategic Compass adopted before the first round of the French elections (10 April 2022) and within the French presidency of the Council (which ended in June 2022). Rotation plays an important role, given that the presidency brings negotiating advantages and facilitates the assertion and defence of national interests. This argument could explain Germany's reluctance.

The content is divided into four strands: performance, security, investment and partnership. In each, the Strategic Compass indicates the threats faced, outlines current mechanisms and, to a lesser extent, presents new proposals. For example: in the field of action it intends to create a rapid deployment capability of around 5,000 military personnel or in the field of security it proposes the creation of a cyber diplomacy policy. The most important part of the paper is its explanation of geopolitical threats and mutations, emphasising the multidimensional and hybrid nature of threats. In addition, it lists a number of principles that are present in the new strategic environment. The most relevant principles expressed throughout the document are resilience, solidarity and multilateralism.

Given its extensive content and proposals that are difficult to achieve in a short period of time, a suspicion arises that the Strategic Compass follows the pattern used by the European Union in its treaties of setting broad objectives and then giving them substance, as was the case with the Common Security Policy. These proposals or recommendations face a kind of "Rubick's cube" in which, in order to solve the problem, the ecosystems of all the Member States must coincide, which is why some define the Strategic Compass as a kind of European white paper for defence (Ruiz, 2022).

The Strategic Compass sets goals but does not indicate how to achieve them. This means that it is more of a strategic alert than a strategic compass, because the document itself notes Europe's lack of geostrategic orientation, which is intensified by the emergence of geopolitical mutations**,** new threats and challenges surrounding Europe.

Below is an analysis of the geostrategic actors identified in the Strategic Compass.

Geostrategic actors			
Partners			Actors causing insecurity
Main	Secondary		
	Regional	Bilateral	
5. NATO[13] 6. G7[14] 7. UN[15] 8. U S[16]	4. OSCE17 5. ASEAN 18 6. Future partners: 6.1. League of Arab States 6.1. Gulf Cooperation Council	10. Norway 11. Canada 10. The UK 11. Japan 12. Türkiye 13. Eastern Partners 14. Southern Neighbourhood 15. Africa 16. Latin America	10. Russia 11. Belarus 12. China 13. Democratic People's Republic of Korea 14. Arctic Region 15. Southern Neighbourhood (Libya and Syria) 16. Türkiye 17. Iran 18. Eastern Neighbourhood (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, South Caucasus countries).

Table 1. Geostrategic actors from the perspective of the Strategic Compass

Compared to previous European security and defence strategies: the 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS) and the Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS), the Strategic Compass has an element that sets it apart with regard to the treatment of geostrategic actors. It is the first document in the field of European defence to differentiate between strategic partners; specifically, it divides them into multilateral, regional and bilateral, and within these categories into essential and secondary partners (Antonozzi, 2022). There are some striking aspects to this picture:

1. The inclusion of the UK alongside Norway and Canada, even though the former has a stronger institutional relationship with the EU than Norway and Canada.

2. No reference to the UK as a partner, when this could increase Europe's strategic autonomy. It is an essential partner with defence expenditure of 4.23% of total public spending and growing importance after joining the AUKUS military strategic alliance. This alliance is a trilateral agreement announced on 15 September 2021 between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States with the aim of ensuring peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific (Martin, 2022). Its main objective is to promote security cooperation, mainly through providing nuclear-powered submarines to the Australian navy (Perot, 2021).

13 North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

14 Group of Seven.

15 United Nations.

16 United States.

17 Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

18 Association of South East Asian Nations.

Several scholars such as Perot (2021) and Mouritzen (2023) claim that it is an attempt to curb China's influence in this region through integrating science, technology, industry and supply chains between these three countries (Cheng, 2022), although no express reference is made to this objective in the AUKUS (Rodríguez, 2019).

3. No differentiation between the status of candidate country and mere partner. This issue has produced rising tensions between Türkiye and the EU that were expressed in the Ankara Foreign Ministry's March 2022 communiqué[19], when it alleged that the rights of Türkiye and Turkish Cypriots in the Eastern Mediterranean were being undermined, even going so far as to declare: "in the absence of a direction, the document cannot be called strategic or a compass, and the EU is part of the problem rather than the solution in the Eastern Mediterranean", adding that "it will not guide the union towards the right strategies".

4. The Strategic Compass emphasises on numerous occasions the importance of the transatlantic link, referring to the need to strengthen this partnership and strategic cooperation, to adopt a more structured political dialogue, with greater coherence, to develop common responses to threats and challenges, to establish close and mutually beneficial cooperation, etc.[20] Therefore, another important aspect is to analyse NATO's role in this new framework, and how European strategic autonomy would affect the transatlantic link. In other words, whether the EU will actually defend its own interests or align them at the same time with those of the United States. It is important to analyse whether it is more useful to strengthen European capabilities within NATO or in a new autonomous European defence strategy.

6. Conclusions

Today's post-modern naivety makes it impossible to understand the current geopolitical scene and makes it hard to achieve true strategic autonomy that can be a tool for both prevention and self-defence. One of the most complex aspects is adapting these tools to the current unstable climate of geopolitical mutations, and it will only be possible through solid planning and strategy, elements that are difficult to achieve in the current framework. Each international actor designs its own strategy according to its own interests and needs. The result is different concepts of strategic autonomy and different speeds at which it can be constructed, adapted and implemented.

19 Turkey slams EU for non-visionary "Strategic Compass". (2022, 23 March). *Hüriet Daily News*.

20 References taken from the Strategic Compass document.

In today's European security and defence framework, the European Union's Security and Defence Policy is not a military alliance, nor is it set up as an instrument of common or collective defence. This is because the Member States want to remain intergovernmental in security and defence matters. In this regard, it is necessary to reflect on whether the Strategic Compass is really proposing a military alliance and, if so, how it intends to carry out this project within a supranational international organisation, based on the allocation of responsibilities.

The European Union was created with the aim of achieving peaceful cooperation between European states through economic integration. To this end, the Member States agreed that their international relations would be governed by a common legal system and institutional structure, renouncing the rule of force. The European Union is an organisation with a series of distinctive signs and shared values; defence is not among them, and this aspect of its identity could be difficult to relinquish.

Strategic autonomy is an open and undefined concept due to the existence of diverse security ecosystems influenced by different strategic defence cultures that make it difficult to conceptualise in a unanimous and homogeneous way by the different Member States. This obstacle is present in several aspects of its main dimensions, areas that need to be coordinated, concurrent and proportional. In the industrial dimension, key elements for achieving strategic autonomy are strategic planning leading to a common strategy through clear leadership accepted by the different Member States. In the industrial dimension, joint procurement of equipment and investment and cooperation are key aspects of strengthening the European Defence Market and the EU's industrial and technological base. Finally, in the operational dimension, strengthening and boosting the development of new capacities is of paramount importance.

Strategic autonomy is a two-way rather than a one-way street. Therefore, greater European autonomy could lead to greater autonomy of the EU vis-à-vis other powers. The Strategic Compass attempts to alleviate this reality through the concept of "open strategic autonomy", which runs the risk of each player in the same game playing by different rules.

The reality is that adopting strategic autonomy does not guarantee a "*pareto-efficient*" solution for all Member States, and therefore a study of how far Member States are prepared to give up their own benefits and interests is needed. In other words, what the acceptable and unacceptable level of strategic autonomy is for the different Member States.

The line between dependence/interdependence and independence is very blurred, especially when strategic autonomy is viewed as gradual. The EU must pay close attention to ensure that, while strengthening its own strategic autonomy, it does not undermine Europe's position in global value chains. The European Union must achieve a balanced distribution of dependencies, bearing in mind that, in some areas, reducing or diversifying dependencies between different actors is not possible, and it must therefore focus its efforts on those areas where it is possible.

It is important to delve deeper into what is, and not what should be; only then can progress be made towards achieving ambitious strategic autonomy.

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