

The Pursuit of the EU's Strategic Autonomy: Motivated, but still Ambiguous

Sungwook Yoon*

Chungbuk National University

Abstract

The purpose of this research is to analyse what motivates the EU for its strategic autonomy, but to explore what makes the EU still uncertain over European strategic autonomy. Even though there are still controversies over the issues regarding strategic autonomy, the EU is likely to intend to pursue its autonomous policies in various fields. The problem is, however, that it is not clear yet what the EU's position is in terms of strategic autonomy. This results in various speculations on the possibility and necessity of the EU's policies based on the notion of strategic autonomy, and even implications on transatlantic relations. This paper introduced various issues which motivated the EU to strengthen strategic autonomy such as rivalry competition between the US and China, the US withdrawal of the JCPOA and the Paris Climate agreement, the EU-China CAI and the AUKUS pact. The advent of the Trump administration which caused transatlantic tensions served as a momentum to add fuel to blazing up debates over strategic autonomy within the EU. In spite of these motivations, this research argues that the reasons for the EU's ambiguous position on strategic autonomy are internal and external worries: internally, there are worries of power concentration to particular member states, notably France and Germany; and externally, the pursuit of European strategic autonomy is generally perceived to deteriorate a traditional transatlantic relationship.

Keywords

The European Union, Strategic Autonomy, Security and Defence, Transatlantic Alliance, The US

* Professor, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Chungbuk National University. Email: yoonsw@cbnu.ac.kr.

I . Introduction: Puzzle

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has shocked the world. Beyond the suffering and humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, Russia's attack on Ukraine has put the world on edge and at risk. The impact of the war between Russia and Ukraine has reached more and more countries and sectors; many countries already joined sanctions against Russia led by the US and the EU; but the global economy has been seriously hit, in particular by strikingly rising energy and food prices. It seems to be certain that Russia's invasion of Ukraine could change the European security order and even the international order. Some even argue that the war in Ukraine could accelerate the pace that the world enters into the early stage of a new Cold War.

These concerns have been realised more seriously in Europe. The EU has already suffered from the increasing price of energy, in that the impact of sanctions against Russia, especially the EU's ban on Russian energy, turns back to the EU as a boomerang. This is mainly because the EU is highly dependent on Russian energy. The more serious concern to the EU is the risk of its security. The main purpose of European integration after the Second World War is to put an end to a war in Europe for permanent peace-building and prosperity. This European project seems to be successful before the war in Ukraine as the European Security Strategy (ESS) which firstly clarifies the EU's security strategy in 2003 describes "Europe has never been so prosperous, so secure nor so free" (European Council 2003). Russia's attack on Ukraine, however, means an end to peace in Europe.

Furthermore, the EU has shown its inability to counter Russian revanchism (Drea 2022) as well as to deter Russia from invading Ukraine while a battlefield is in Europe.

There is no wonder that the EU's credibility in security and defence was shredded, and the public concerns over security in Europe deepen. Whilst the EU has shown its unprecedentedly robust response to Russia's attack on Ukraine, the EU's response is just as it is. Various criticism has been focused upon the EU's capability in terms of security and defence. Member states of the EU have not shown their unity in dealing with Russia's invasion and the future relations with Russia. The war in Ukraine has also exposed fundamental differences in the way of responding to Russia's aggression between Central, Eastern and Northern member states and the old member states of the EU (Dempsey 2022). Nevertheless, there is one common consciousness that the EU needs to find a way of strengthening its security and identifying its role regarding security and defence in Europe.

As mentioned above, member states especially bordered or adjacent to Russia stress more aggressive policy toward Russia through more engagement of the US and NATO. It is understandable, in that these countries face Russia's invasion as a live threat, and they realise their dependence for security on NATO led by the US, not on the EU. This war corroborates that the EU does not have the capability to prevent Russia from invading Ukraine; moreover, the US has been at the centre of the war against Russia, which means the European security is still at hands of the US and Russia. In this sense, it is a feasible scenario that the US and Russia could decide a new security order after the end of the war in Ukraine as similarly happened after World War II. There is

another argument, despite the EU's limited capability and deficiencies, that the EU needs to be independent and thus, to ensure its own security and defence (Szewczyk 2022). This argument sounds sensible as overwhelming majority (88%) of Europeans support the idea of deepening integration in the area of a common European defence and security policy by creating, for example, a European army (European Commission 2022). The necessity of the EU's more active and important role in world affairs is supported by a clear majority of respondents (80 percent) according to the survey conducted by BertelsmannStiftung.¹⁾

Conditions are matured that the idea of autonomy in terms of the EU's security and defence is recalled within the EU. In order to defend Europe and protect the EU's civilisation, the notion of European strategic autonomy has been re-brought to the fore. It can be a practical assessment that the path toward European strategic autonomy in the areas of security and defence seems to be easily rejected due to failure of consensus among member states. The EU, however, has emphasised strategic autonomy in several occasions. Moreover, the concept of strategic autonomy has been expanded to new areas such as economic, technological and even foreign policies. It cannot be clarified when the expansion exactly began; but the arguments for European strategic autonomy seem to be reinforced when the situations surrounding the EU are unfavourable. Several recent issues such as COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the EU's trouble with the US have brought strategic autonomy into debates within the EU; the main theme of debates is converged on whether strategic autonomy is necessary and possible for

1) This survey has been conducted between March 11 and 23 and June 3 and 24 of 2022 for nearly 12,000 EU citizens. See for more details, de Vries & Hoffmann (2022).

the EU. Despite debates and discussion in various fields, there has been one common conclusion that nothing is clear yet.

This research starts at this point. Even though there are still controversies over the issues regarding strategic autonomy, the EU is likely to intend to pursue its autonomous policies in various fields. The problem is, however, that it is not clear what the EU's position is in terms of strategic autonomy. This results in various speculations on the possibility and necessity of the EU's policies based on the notion of strategic autonomy, and even implications on transatlantic relations. Therefore, this research particularly pays attention to the reasons why previous research in terms of strategic autonomy goes around in circles. This is mainly because the concept of strategic autonomy even within the EU is not elucidated, which leads previous research on defining 'European strategic autonomy' to the conclusion of 'vagueness'.

From these perspectives, the aim of this research is to analyse what motivates the EU for its strategic autonomy, but to explore what makes the EU still uncertain over European strategic autonomy. For this, Section II will discuss the origin and evolution of European strategic autonomy. Section II will also verify the ambiguity of the term of strategic autonomy even within the EU. The next section has two parts: the first part of Section III will explore various issues which served as a momentum for the EU to pursue its strategic autonomy; and the second part will analyse the reason why the EU is uncertain over strategic autonomy. The final section is the conclusion which includes a summary of this research and suggestions for self-reliant Europe.

II. Origins and Evolution of the EU's Strategic Autonomy

The term of strategic autonomy is generally used at the European level, but the first use of the term can be found in one of the member states, France. It is a well-known fact that France has been more serious and sincerer than any other member states of the EU in call for the EU to become a more independent and sovereign player in the world stage (Ciulla & Varma 2021). In 1950, General de Gaulle mentioned the concept of 'strategic autonomy' for the first time during a press interview; that is, "the weaponry is limited, as you know, to weapons that confer no strategic autonomy upon us. [...] It may be unacceptable to us not to be able to do anything by ourselves" (Ryon 2020, 239). The next appearance of strategic autonomy was in the French White Paper on defence and national security in 1994, which, at that time, solely focused on France's national security. An updated French White Paper published in 2008 under President Sarkozy firstly attempted to link national strategic autonomy to the EU, which laid out "France is in favour of giving fresh impetus to the European Union in the field of defence and security" (Odile Jacob 2008). In the French context, the concept of strategic autonomy was 'the ability to use military force autonomously' (Retter *et al.* 2021).

However, the origin of strategic autonomy at the European domain is still controversial. Similar meanings with strategic autonomy have been mentioned in discussions of European security defence. The Council

conclusions adopted in Cologne in June 1999 as the foundational text of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) emphasises the EU's capacity for autonomous actions in order to respond to international crises without prejudice to actions by NATO.²⁾ The autonomous action by the EU was already stressed in the Franco-British St. Malo Declaration on December 1998. While the EU's capacity is commonly focused in both the Cologne conclusions and St. Malo Declaration, it is a distinguished point in St. Malo Declaration that is to include the EU's capacity for autonomous decision-making. It is generally accepted that the first appearance of the term, 'strategic autonomy' at the European level was in the European Council conclusions on EU common security and defence policy (CSDP) of December 2013. In the context of strengthening Europe's defence industry, the 2013 Council conclusion explains the necessity of the EU's defence technological and industrial base (EDTIB) in order to develop and sustain defence capabilities, which can enhance the EU's strategic autonomy and ability to act with partners.³⁾

The adoption of the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) in 2016 is considered

2) The original text is Annex III. 1. [...] In pursuit of our Common Foreign and Security Policy objectives and the progressive framing of a common defence policy, we are convinced that the Council should have the ability to take decisions on the full range of conflict prevention and crisis management tasks defined in the Treaty on European Union, the "Petersberg tasks". To this end, the Union must have the capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces, the means to decide to use them, and a readiness to do so, in order to respond to international crises without prejudice to actions by NATO. The EU will thereby increase its ability to contribute to international peace and security in accordance with the principles of the UN Charter. For more details, see the European Council (1999), Cologne European Council Conclusions of the Presidency, Annex III, Brussels: European Council.

3) The EDTIB, according to the Council conclusion (2013), needs to be more integrated, sustainable, innovative and competitive.

to open a new stage for European strategic autonomy, which claims to nurture the EU's ambition of strategic autonomy (Franke & Varma 2019, 2). The EUGS clearly identifies the EU's role and intention to enhance its capabilities regarding security issues. The appearance of European strategic autonomy in the EUGS is related to the EU's purpose for strengthening and reforming the CSDP in the scope of the CFSP (Lippert *et al.* 2019, 6). The main difference speculated in the 2016 EUGS from the previous explanation at the EU level is that the EU focuses on actively dealing with security problems which are not regarded as priorities by the US (Smith 2018). In addition, the EU is likely to take actions, according to the EUGS, even when the EU and the US have different approaches to handle the problems. Despite the EU's emphasis on cooperation with major partners, notably the US, the EU's ways of taking actions as a security actor according to the EUGS are different from the US. According to Smith (2018), the EU stresses 'comprehensive' or 'integrated' approach to foreign and security policy by utilising various range of power resources (e.g. economic and less-threatening types of armed force) rather than giving primacy to military force. Recognition of the security problem is another point of difference between the EU and the US. As the EUGS also explains, the EU asserts a different approach in handling complex security problems. This position of the EU as a security actor is based on the principles the EU highly values such as multilateral cooperation with partners and international organisations and rule of law.⁴⁾

4) Compared to the EU, Smith (2008) characterises the US strategies and policies as (1) unilateral action for its interests, (2) the use of military force without constraints like the approval of the UN Security Council, (3) considering preemptive and preventive action against potential threats,

‘Implementation plan on security and defence’ published on November 2016 less than five months after the adoption of the EUGS provides loose definition of Europe’s strategic autonomy, which is “the ability to act and cooperate with international and regional partners wherever possible, while being able to operate autonomously when and where necessary” (European Council 2016). It does not have any different approach on the EU’s strategic autonomy compared to the EUGS; rather, this document also reinforces cooperation with partners in multilateral framework with a focus on security and defence.

As explained so far, the original concept of Europe’s strategic autonomy derived from and applied to the area of security and defence (Tocci 2019). The expansion of the scope of strategic autonomy from security and defence domains to other policy areas began by individuals, especially pro-Europeanists. French President Emmanuel Macron as a pro-European President delivered his speech entitled ‘Initiative for Europe’ at Sorbonne in 2017 by introducing the notion of ‘European sovereignty’.⁵⁾ With an emphasis on the European sovereignty, Macron proposed in that speech to ensure sovereignty in other policy areas such as agriculture, energy and digital technology surely including security and defence. Although Macron newly introduced the term, ‘sovereignty’ rather than the previously-used ‘autonomy’, the concept between two terms are not different at least to Macron. According to Weber (2022), it is a political signal to other member states, particularly in Eastern

and (4) the use of a full range of military resources for a wide range of purposes.

5) For a full text of Macron’s speech, see Ouest france,

<http://international.blogs.ouest-france.fr/archive/2017/09/29/macron-sorbonne-verbatim-europe-18583.html> .

Europe who have relatively more stressed the role of the US and NATO for their security and defence, and perceived the concept of 'autonomy' as 'autonomy from the US and NATO'.⁶⁾ It is true, however, that the term, 'sovereignty' does not satisfy all member states. This is mainly because the term, 'sovereignty' is more likely to be perceived as decoupling from the US and/or NATO than 'autonomy'.

This phenomenon of expanding applied areas of strategic autonomy is presented at the European level. Although initially focused on security and defence, the concept of the European strategic autonomy has a turning point of broadening its scope when the Commission published 'industrial strategy for Europe' in 2020 (European Commission 2020). Having admitted the EU's overall dependence, the European Commission sees the concept of strategic autonomy in two dimensions, 'defensive' and 'offensive' (Van den Abeele 2021, 13).

"[...] the Industrial Strategy of March 2020 already underlined the importance for the EU of reducing dependence on others for things we need the most: critical materials and technologies, food, infrastructure, security and other strategic areas [...] including by diversifying production and supply chains, ensuring strategic stockpiling, as well as fostering production and investment in Europe"

(European Commission 2020, 6)

In short, the concept of European strategic autonomy means the EU needs to reduce the EU's external dependency in terms of a defensive

6) However, there is an argument 'strategic autonomy' and 'European sovereignty' needs to be distinguished. According to Fiott (2022), while 'strategic autonomy' is about political action, 'European sovereignty' is related to political authority.

dimension; furthermore, offensively, the EU should develop market, products and services externally.

It was French President, Emmanuel Macron who particularly highlighted the concept of strategic autonomy in a similar context with the Commission's approach. In his speech at Sorbonne, so-called, 'Macron doctrine' (Van den Abeele 2021, 15) of emphasising 'common strategic culture' was introduced. Macron's speech was in line with what the Commission stresses, in that Macron asserted European sovereignty to control borders and to preserve value through economic, industrial and monetary power.

Nevertheless, the way and degree of evolving the EU's strategic autonomy cannot be easily estimated. Diverse variables which could affect the future of European strategic autonomy exist within and beyond the EU, which indicates it is not certain 'why the EU chooses strategic autonomy and how it can be developed'. There is one clue, however, we can guess from one of the EU's top officials' speech.

Charles Michel, President of the European Council and an advocate for European strategic autonomy, outlines three objectives for the EU to choose strategic autonomy, which are 'stability', 'disseminating the EU's standards' and 'promoting the EU's value'.⁷⁾ Stability can be achieved through foremost physical security as well as environmental, economic, social security including, for example, digital sovereignty and migration policies. This means strategic autonomy is required for stability of the EU; moreover, Michel's remark signifies the EU is expected to pursue

7) See for more details, European Council (2020a), "'Strategic autonomy for Europe - the aim of our generation' - speech by President Charles Michel to the Bruegel think tank", Press Release (28 September 2020), European Council.

its autonomy, at least, in those areas. Disseminating the EU's standards indicates the EU intends to take the lead in standard-setting in some areas. This means the EU will protect and pursue its own interests. The third objective of 'promoting the EU's value' is quite related to the second one, which purports the EU will take actions more autonomously guided by values and principles the EU respects. Charles Michel's interview for the journal 'Le Grand Continent' in November 2020 also indicates his vision for the Union by strengthening European strategic autonomy. He said in that interview,⁸⁾

“It is essential that our Europe should find the ways and means to decide for itself and not to depend on others, in all areas, ranging from the technological to health and geopolitics, and to be able to cooperate with whomever it chooses. [...] That is why I believe that the concept of European strategic autonomy or European sovereignty is very strong, very fertile, that it says that we are a coherent political and cultural area, that we owe it to our citizens not to depend on others, and that this is essential in order to have any influence among nations in the contemporary world.”

Another change of the concept of strategic autonomy was made in the European Council on October 2020. The strategic autonomy was discussed as one of the main agendas in that Council meeting particularly in the fields of the international market, industrial policy and digital technology (Van den Abeele 2021, 16). However, a dissenting

8) Le Grand Continent (2020). 'La doctrine Macron. Une conversation avec le Président français (The Macron Doctrine. A conversation with the French President)', Le Grand Continent, published by the Groupe d'Etudes géopolitiques (20 November 2020).

view was raised that some member states⁹⁾ insisted ‘compatibility’ between ‘autonomy’ and ‘open economy’. This was reflected in the Conclusion of the Council, which points out “Achieving strategic autonomy while preserving an open economy is a key objective of the Union” (European Council 2020b).

Further discussion was made in the Competitiveness Council of November 2020, which made the concept of strategic autonomy more concrete. According to paragraph 3 of the Council Conclusion, the concept of strategic autonomy is not limited to reducing the EU’s dependencies; rather, it embraces, for example, the diversification of production and supply chains, strategic stockpiling, and attraction of investments and production in Europe (European Council 2020c).¹⁰⁾ The Council Conclusion reaffirms the importance of achieving strategic autonomy as stressed in the Commissions’ industrial strategy.

The above discussion tells us what the EU’s approach towards strategic autonomy is as the EU officially announced a definition of strategic autonomy in the 2016 Council conclusions, which is “capacity to act autonomously when and where necessary and with partners

9) They are Ireland, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Slovakia, Malta and Spain.

10) The original text in the Conclusions is, “HIGHLIGHTS that achieving strategic autonomy while preserving an open economy is a key objective of the Union¹¹ in order to self-determine its economic path and interests ; RECALLS that this includes identifying and reducing strategic dependencies and increasing resilience in the most sensitive industrial ecosystems and specific areas, such as health, defence industry, space, digital, energy and critical raw materials; UNDERLINES that this can include diversifying production and supply chains, ensuring strategic stockpiling, fostering and attracting investments and production in Europe, exploring alternative solutions and circular models, and promoting broad industrial cooperation across Member States”.

wherever possible". Nevertheless, complaints still exist that the concept of strategic autonomy is ambiguous. This seems to be mainly because the degree and scope of European strategic autonomy has been modified according the change of global situations. One telling example is, as already mentioned, the US foreign policy under the Trump administration which caused a cleavage of transatlantic relations made the EU keener to achieve strategic autonomy. At that time, debates on European strategic autonomy have been limited to clarifying the EU's intention, 'whether the EU intends to strengthen its economic and political capabilities vis-à-vis the US, and then to play its role as an independent global actor'. These debates extend to any possible changes of the EU-NATO relationship and even transatlantic alliance. The recent events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine serve as a momentum for the EU to strengthen its autonomy not only in the areas of public health and security but in other policy areas.

In this sense, the EU-US relationship and the possible change of their alliance including the relations with NATO will be an essential factor in elaborating the future concept of European strategic autonomy. It is evident strategic autonomy does not mean the EU's decoupling from the US, as Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy emphasises the transatlantic alliance and the European defence under the framework of NATO. The EU has been very cautious with any possible misperception pertaining to its strategic autonomy contrary to the EU's intent. The realities that the European security is still at the US hands, as outspokenly exposed in the recent crisis in Ukraine, seem to be also reflected on the EU's position on reinforcing the transatlantic relation.

The EU's incapability of independently defending its own security and interests could be the main reason why the idea of strategic autonomy is contested between member states, and thus, the EU has not been willing to clarify its stance on the definition of strategic autonomy. The EU has tended to reiterate its foreign policy principles, rather than to stress 'autonomy', that the EU wants to work with major partners including the US and international organisations like the UN to solve global problems, and to keep multilateral cooperation alive. It can be concluded the actualities of strategic autonomy are not yet to be ascertained even within the EU even though the concept of European strategic autonomy has evolved.

III. Reasons for Motivation and Ambiguity

The evolution of European strategic autonomy has aroused many countries' interests in situation of a growing competition between the US and China. Their power competition has given pressures to other countries of taking sides between two powers. It stands to reason that the EU as a traditional ally with the US may be perceived to support the US position and policies. As witnessed in various occasions, however, the EU has shown its own actions which have been sometimes different from the US approach. This is the reason why European strategic autonomy has become the main subject of the EU's foreign policy. The EU's more independent policies have given more impacts to other countries who seek for a way to mitigate the pressure of choice

for the purpose of protecting their security and economic interests. This is another reason why the EU's strategic autonomy has been globally more focused and emphasised nowadays.

1. What motivates the EU towards strategic autonomy?

The fundamental reason for resurgence of European strategic autonomy can be found in the change of European and international security environments. As shown in Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the war in Ukraine, power politics have been re-emerged (Järvenpää *et al.* 2019). A return of power politics has led to the demise of the EU's principles and values (e.g. multilateralism and rule of law) under the framework of the liberal international order. In addition, the US priority in its foreign policy has shifted to Asia, more specifically to Indo-Pacific region, which pressured the EU to find a way to protect its security and interests.

The most obvious case which provoked the EU to be more independent is the appearance of US President, Trump and hits foreign policy towards Europe. This atmosphere hung over the EU; and member states, notably Germany and France, have urged the necessity of more independence in the EU's security and defence.

“The times in which we could completely depend on others are, to a certain extent, over. I (Angela Merkel) have experienced that in the last few days. We Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands.” (The Guardian 28 May 2017).

“It is no longer such that the United States simply protects us, but Europe must take its destiny in its own hands, that’s the task of the future” (Euractiv 11 May 2018).

The former German Chancellor, Angela Merkel urged the EU must fight for its own future and destiny more independently from the US in 2017 after G7 summit, and in 2018 at the ceremony in Aachen for Charlemagne prize after the US withdrawal from Iran nuclear deal. Merkel’s warning and emphasis on independence seemed determined because two unexpected results of the UK’s Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump as US President in 2016 have badly undermined the traditional transatlantic partnership (The Guardian 28 May 2017). It can be said, therefore, the inauguration of the Trump administration undoubtedly motivated the EU’s efforts towards pursuing strategic autonomy.

1) The US-China Standoff

The decline of the liberal international order, particularly since the Trump administration, has brought the new norm of great power rivalry between the US and China. The strategic competition between the US and China has come to dominate not only the US foreign policy debates but also other countries’ in the globe. Their power competition is

unlikely to change both in the US and China for the foreseeable future.

11) Moreover, the trajectories of their strategic competition will be an essential factor to shape a new international order.

One common feature in their competition is neither the US nor China considers 'rule-based cooperation' in their respective strategies (Grevi 2019). Various international agreements and institutions have become a mere scrap of paper whenever they are not beneficial for their interests. The principles like 'multilateralism' and 'rule of law' that the EU considers as the European value disappear, and power politics are again placed at the centre of international affairs. The EU has been also in the middle of trade disputes since the Trump administration took several actions such as imposing tariffs on steel and aluminium imports from the EU. Despite a different aspect of the developments of the EU-US trade disputes from the US-China trade war, there were common grounds of the US policies based on Trump's catchphrase, 'America First'. The EU has maintained its stance of restoration of multilateralism and rule of law, and eventually liberal international order.

It can be said that the EU alone is unable to restore the international order; furthermore, this issue has been, to some extent, diluted with other problems which hit the world such as COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Nevertheless, one critical question has been left to the EU – actually to most of countries in the world; that is, what is the EU's stance under the ongoing rivalry situation between the US and

11) Grevi (2019) sees a turning point in the US-China strategic competition when Donald Trump was elected as US President in 2016 and President Xi outlined his ambition of China to be a global power at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party in 2017.

China? In other words, the EU may face rising pressure or wooing to effectively choose sides between these two big powers. The EU may well choose and support the US under a traditional transatlantic relationship. As the transatlantic relationship is unlikely to return to the *status quo ante*, however, the EU has shown its own approaches to deal with dilemma situations. This means the EU intends not to be involved in a contest between China and the US, in that the EU does not want to jeopardise its economic benefits from the relationship with China. In a similar manner, the EU's approach vis-à-vis their power competition is to maintain 'Sinatra Doctrine', which means 'the EU has to do things its own way' in order to defend its values and interests by increasing strategic autonomy (EEAS 2020). What the EU should do in a situation of the US-China stand-off is, therefore, to find its place and to identify the areas (e.g. technology, security and defence) of pursuing strategic autonomy (Grevi 2019; Damen 2022).

2) The US Withdrawal of JCPOA and the Paris Climate Agreement

The divergence between the EU and the US on issues such as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and the Paris Climate Agreement particularly after Trump was elected as the US President was another motivation for the EU to strengthen its strategic autonomy. Fundamentally, the EU has shown different approaches from the US. This means the EU, although the EU and the US traditionally have maintained a firm transatlantic alliance, demonstrates its willingness of upholding multilateralism regardless of the US support and leadership (Fiott 2018).

The EU's efforts to preserve the JCPOA after the Trump

administration had ceased the US participation in May 2018 was the testing ground for examining European strategic autonomy. The US withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear deal was perceived as a major blow to the EU because the JCPOA was deemed a major success of the EU's foreign policy. The EU, in order to counter unilateral US sanctions, engaged in a series of actions such as updating the 'Blocking Statute' (Perteghella 2021). Although the JCPOA is still alive and the negotiations for the revival are underway, the EU's commitment and aspirations to be a global player have been assessed to remain limited and the EU's struggle toward achieving strategic autonomy has been perceived as 'not successful'. (Lohmann 2021). Nevertheless, the pursuit of European strategic autonomy in this case of preserving the JCPOA indicates the EU continues to pursue its independence in security areas.

In a similar vein, the EU with its leadership position in climate change has continued to develop initiatives and engage other countries in order to keep the Paris Climate agreement working. The US withdrawal from the Paris agreement again made the EU call for multilateral cooperation as the leader. As discussed before, the concept of the EU's strategic autonomy has never meant unilateralism, but the US unilateral actions make the EU eager for strategic autonomy (Fattori 2022). The EU's effort to defend the Paris Climate agreement is a telling example of demonstrating the EU's capacity for resistance (Vimont 2020).

3) The EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI)

Many believe that the new administration in the US after President Trump could re-strengthen the transatlantic alliance, which could eventually quiet down the controversy over the EU's strategic autonomy.

However, the world witnessed that the EU and China reached an ambitious bilateral investment agreement after eight years of negotiations in December 2020 only a few weeks before a new US president, Joe Biden was inaugurated. This event shows the EU is increasingly willing to forge its own path for its interests and possibly diverge with US priorities (Smith 2018). In addition to commercial interests, the key to understand the reason for the EU's agreement with China despite the US opposition lies in the broad strategic and geopolitical considerations on the basis of strategic autonomy. It is true that the EU publicly announces its different position towards China from the US who wants the EU to decouple from the Chinese economy (Tocci 2021, 13). The European Commission set out an assessment of the EU-China relations in 'Strategic Outlook' published in 2019, which illustrates the EU's approach towards China as a partner for cooperation and negotiation, an economic competitor and a systemic rival (European Commission 2019).

The EU's agreement on investment with China in spite of the US strong opposition is a very clear sign that the EU attempts to establish its autonomy in the international arena, not returning to '*the status quo ante* of the EU to play a second-fiddle to the US' (Hutt 2020). The suspension of ratification of the agreement also indicates the EU's strategic autonomy; the EU reached the agreement with China obviously for its interests, but the agreement was suspended to be ratified due to imposing sanctions under the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime on Chinese officials engaged in severe human rights violations against the Uyghur and people from other Muslim ethnic minorities in China's Xinjiang region. The EU's decision of suspension is considered that the EU takes actions – agreement and suspension – independently

based on its interests and principles, which is the core of European strategic autonomy.

4) The AUKUS Pact and French vision

The AUKUS treaty agreed between Australia, the US and the UK served as another opportunity for the EU to assert its strategic autonomy. The trilateral security pact suddenly scrapped the contract between France and Australia without any consultation on France or on the EU (Medcalf 2022). The abrupt cancellation of Australia's submarine contract with France due to the AUKUS pact stimulated French President, Emmanuel Macron who has the most strongly stressed among the EU leaders the vision of 'European sovereignty' (Panda 2022). It was a disastrous issue for transatlantic ties as France perceived the US-led trilateral agreement as a 'stab in the back' (Bhatia 2021). Panda (2022) also points out the date of the AUKUS announcement, '15 September 2021' was bad strategic timing because the EU released its strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. The AUKUS pact certainly has its impact in various dimension: firstly, the US-driven agreement is likely to incur a decline of confidence in the US and its leadership; secondly, the pact conducted to the EU's mistrust of the US and thus tensions between them; lastly, the AUKUS pact convinced the EU of calling for strategic autonomy by realising that dependence on the US cannot be a viable option. In this sense, Biden's administration has given a new impetus for the EU to substantiate why European strategic autonomy vis-à-vis the US and beyond is necessary (Spanger 2021).

Apart from the AUKUS pact, France has had a long-wish to create more autonomous or sovereign, according to Macron's term, Europe

since General de Gaulle mentioned it on March 1950. As mentioned before, Macron since he came to power in 2017 has claimed the French vision of Europe's 'strategic autonomy' or 'strategic sovereignty' to be Europeanised. The AUKUS pact has certainly provoked French vision of European sovereignty with a strong support by the EU.

2. Why is the EU uncertain over European strategic autonomy?

Regarding the concept of strategic autonomy, it is obvious that the origins, definition and perception are still ambiguous despite efforts to explain the term. Even though the EU's institutions like the Commission and the Parliament provide the definition of European strategic autonomy, ambiguity of the concept of strategic autonomy remains unchanged.¹²⁾ Lack of clarity of European strategic autonomy has eventually made room for different interpretation and disagreement. However, this research verifies that the EU clearly has its intention to pursue its strategic autonomy. One question can be raised at this point, which is 'why is the EU's approach or its action towards strategic autonomy still uncertain?'

One of the main issues regarding the EU's strategic autonomy is the implication on transatlantic relations; that is, there are some doubts whether the EU's strategic autonomy would indicate a split in transatlantic partnership, which could result in a geostrategic setback for

12) For example, the European Parliament Research Service (2020) defines European strategic autonomy as 'the ability to act autonomously and the ability to choose whether and in what ways to collaborate with like-minded partners in matters of security and defence. The capacity to act autonomously implies both the ability to decide and to implement decisions in an autonomous manner'.

the US not only in Europe but in the international arena as well. The problem lies in different perception by either side of the Atlantic. The US perception of strategic autonomy could possibly come from confusion with sovereignty, independence, unilateralism and autarky (Tocci 2019). If the US understands European strategic autonomy as an independent policy through defence integration, the EU's policy, from the US point of view, causes duplication or undermining of NATO and thus, curtailment of the US influence in European security affairs and more generally in Europe (Retter *et al.* 2021).

The EU has maintained its position of a stronger partnership and cooperation with the US. It is not clear whether the EU is concerned about this public perception. Even if the EU does not seriously take this perception into consideration, a complete decoupling from the US, at this moment, seems to be implausible to the EU at least in the field of security and defence as shown the US engagement is necessary in a war in Ukraine. In spite of the role of the US particularly in the area of European security, the relationship between the EU and the US will be different from the past that the US set up the plan and the EU followed. The EU still has its memory that the President Trump made the transatlantic relations endangered and fearful. Although there have been some signs of relief, Biden's promise of restoration of a traditional transatlantic relationship has not given a full trust to the EU as explained above in the case of the AUKUS deal. On the contrary, the EU by strongly supporting France's position re-emphasised the EU should pursue strategic autonomy.

The transatlantic relationship seems to be unlikely to go back to the traditional. It can be said that the role of the EU in this relationship is

not just to support the US. In this sense, Biden’s promise of ‘restoration’ of their relationship is mirage (Leonard *et al.* 2020). A series of crises such as COVID-19 pandemic, economic recession, high inflation, the shortage of energy and food, and particularly the war in Ukraine, although these motivate the EU to achieve strategic autonomy, do not constitute a favourable condition to the EU’s pursuit of strategic autonomy. This means global governance based on cooperation with major partners, particularly including the US is necessary for the resolution of those problems. This is why the EU has maintained a rather dubious attitude towards strategic autonomy.

Table 1. Scenarios of potential futures of European strategic autonomy

	Scenario 1 A true European pillar of NATO	Scenario 2 European defence integration falters; transatlantic fragmentation	Scenario 3 A strong Europe goes its own way
Level of Conflict in the World	Increase	Decrease	Increase
European Decision making	Led by France, Germany, UK Cohesive	Fragmented No UK involvement	European Security Council set up with permanent and rotating seats
NATO-EU complementarity	Increase	Decrease	Decrease
Perception of the US	U.S. perceived as a reliable ally	Mixed	Perception that the U.S. cannot be relied upon
National defence spending of European nations	≥2% GDP	Decreases	Increases but most countries do not meet 2% GDP target
Integration and interoperability of European capabilities	Increase	Decrease	Increase
Third party access to EU defence market	Increase	No change	Decrease

Source: Retter *et al.* (2021), p.24.

The potential scenario presented above in <Table 1> is based on interviews with experts in the US and the EU. According to Retter *et al.* (2021), the most desirable and beneficial scenario the interviewees see is a Scenario 1. Although European integration in the area of security and defence can be advanced, a Scenario 1 indicates the further integration means the expansion and growth of the existing system such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF) under the framework of the CSDP. The European security and defence system is perceived by the US and other allies as more effective complements to NATO (Retter *et al.* 2021, 24). In a logically similar vein, a Scenario 3 is the most worried one which could diminish the US influence in Europe. It can be understood that most of interviewees see a Scenario 3 implausible because of disagreement among member states on an EU's decoupling from the US and a significant increase in EU defence spending. However, the realisation of a Scenario 3 becomes more plausible, if a post-Biden administration returns to similar policies and approaches adopted by the Trump administration (Retter *et al.* 2021, 28). This analysis verifies two facts: firstly, the US foreign policy under the Trump administration serves as a momentum to hit up the European desire for strategic autonomy; and secondly, the concerns on negative impacts on or damages of transatlantic relations remain relatively strong in terms of the EU's strategic autonomy.

There are some worries to see the EU's strategic autonomy, which is 'misunderstanding' from the EU perspective. Firstly, it is worried that power within the EU may be concentrated on a few member states, notably France and Germany as a clear *sine qua non* of the pursuit of

European strategic autonomy (Tocci 2020). It is understandable as following reasons: France has kept its stance on more independent defence policy on the basis of strategic autonomy since 1950s. It is France that has led discussion on European strategic autonomy in the EU; moreover, the current President, Macron has embodied his political identity both in France and on the European stage in promoting European autonomy and/or sovereignty. Macron's bold steps towards European strategic autonomy have not been always welcomed. For example, Macron's bilateral dialogue with Russia in 2018 irritated some of member states in Eastern Europe with criticising Macron's ill-judged security risks. Furthermore, Macron was blamed especially during French Presidency of the Council of prioritising French vision and bolstering French influence (Brustlein 2018).¹³⁾ It is also argued, therefore, that the EU serves as a platform for France to promote its interest in the world because Macron realises France itself cannot stand against the US and China.

In case of Germany, it is a well-known fact that Franco-German axis has been a power source to advance European integration. More attention has to be paid to the change of Germany's foreign policy due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In addition to delivering arms to Ukraine, Germany decided the increase of its military spending and the halt of the Nord Stream 2 (POLITICO 26 February 2022). It is expected that Germany as an European economic giant becomes a political power to completely change the European defence landscape. That is, the internal

13) In fact, what Macron has done in the Ukraine crisis – for example, active crisis diplomacy and thus remaining Europe's last channel of communication with Putin - deserves to be recognised (Weber 2022).

power concentration towards key players within the EU is the essence of the worries. Another point is how the EU's pursuit of strategic autonomy can be viewed externally. According to Tocci (2020), external view on European strategic autonomy could be misunderstood as the EU's intention of protectionism through weakening interdependence. These worries both internally and externally should not be simply ignored by the EU when the EU is willing to take autonomous actions in various fields. While the EU needs proactive refutation and elucidation of such misunderstanding and worries, very cautious approaches are also necessary for the EU.

IV. Conclusion

The recent international order has been described as being uncertain and unstable. Many countries in the world including the EU and its member states have been urged to seek for their security and prosperity in this global situation. Moreover, the EU is required to strengthen its ability to exert influence and to take actions for its own interests. While the COVID-19 pandemic and more recently, Russia's invasion of Ukraine have shown the EU's limited capabilities to deal with these health and security problems, international situations have certainly intensified the debates about European strategic autonomy. As the EU has faced various problems, the concept of European strategic autonomy has evolved from an initial focus on security and defence at the beginning to other policy areas such as technology, economy including trade, environment, and health.

However, the concept and implications of the EU's strategic autonomy have been rarely explained; therefore, all the problems regarding European strategic autonomy originate in ambiguity of the concept. The controversial concept of European strategic autonomy has been widely debated not only in the EU but also in the international arena. This means the EU's strategic autonomy could have a considerable impact on various areas such as the role of NATO in terms of European security and the transatlantic relations. Nevertheless, nothing is clear yet, because the concept of the term is still ambiguous. In other words, it is disputable to what extent and how the EU will take autonomous actions in which areas. In this regard, the purpose of this research is to explain the reasons for the EU's dubious attitude towards its strategic autonomy, which eventually makes the concept of strategic autonomy blurred.

This paper introduced various issues which motivated the EU to strengthen its strategic autonomy such as rivalry competition between the US and China, the US withdrawal of the JCPOA and the Paris Climate agreement, the EU-China CAI and the AUKUS pact. The advent of the Trump administration which caused transatlantic tensions served as a momentum to add fuel to blazing up debates over strategic autonomy within the EU. It can be said a series of incidents do not signal any divergence of the transatlantic alliance; however, it is certain there is an impact on their alliance. This definitely causes the breach of trust between the US and the EU, which re-ignite the debates on 'why the EU needs strategic autonomy'.

In spite of various motivations, the EU has kept its stance on emphasising the importance of transatlantic alliance and cooperation with the US. This is probably because the EU may realise to be at risk

without the US when the discussion on strategic autonomy is narrowed to the issues of security and defence. More importantly, the EU's continuing emphasis on transatlantic cooperation seems to reflect internal worries and external misunderstanding of strategic autonomy. In this sense, it is understandable even the EU cannot simply conclude 'what European strategic autonomy is' and 'to what extent the EU will advance its strategic autonomy'; or the EU probably hesitates to do so by reading other's faces. In short, it is a matter of the scope and degree when the EU pursues strategic autonomy, in that we all know the EU's strategic autonomy does mean neither the EU's isolation in international arena nor a binary concept like decoupling from the US. One remaining barrier towards European strategic autonomy is so-called, 'grouping' of member states. It is a simply political decision by member states, but it has been witnessed competing national interests have often restricted the decision-making.

This paper also sees the internal worries of power concentration on particular member states, notably France and Germany in order to explain why the EU seems to be uncertain over strategic autonomy. Given a fact that France has maintained its position of more independent Europe, the Franco-German cooperation has been critical in terms of European integration, and Germany particularly stimulated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine seems to be ready to be a political power within the EU, it is logical that other member states who especially oppose and/or disagree on the concept of European strategic autonomy are worried about French and German led strategic autonomy. In this sense, it can be argued that the EU has been caught in dilemma situations; on the one hand, it is time for the EU to consider the necessity of European

strategic autonomy; on the other hand, internal and external perceptions on European strategic autonomy different from the EU's intention make the EU puzzled.

This research demonstrates what the EU's strategic autonomy means is not just to take action; but the EU wants 'freedom to choose among various courses of action' (Smith 2018). Self-reliant Europe means, if the full-fledged (strategic) autonomy cannot be achieved, the EU can choose the course of action and thus, control outcomes. This seems to be the most compatible with the EU's intention of promoting strategic autonomy. It has to be realised, however, there is a big gap in terms of European strategic autonomy between political rhetoric and military, digital and other policy areas' reality (Billon-Galland & Thomson 2018). This paper shows that the EU has demonstrated its steps towards expanding the scope applicable to strategic autonomy. For this, the EU should be acknowledged as powerful as the US, China and Russia by its member states as Biscop (2022) argues; at least, the EU needs to strive to instill confidence in member states that the European strategic autonomy can make the EU more powerful and a fully-fledged actor in international relations (Camporini *et al.* 2017). In addition, the EU should set up steps¹⁴⁾ for strategic autonomy in order not to primarily depend on the decisions and asserts of others. This would be the way of wiping out the misperception and/or misunderstanding of the EU's strategic autonomy.

14) For example, Grevi (2019) points out three important steps, which is 'setting objectives, making decisions and mobilising resources'

References

- Bhatia, R. (2021). *AUKUS: A Stab in the Back of Global Diplomacy*. The Organisation for World Peace.
- Billon-Galland, A. & Thomson, A. (2018). *European Strategic Autonomy: Stop Talking, Start Planning*. European Defence Policy Brief, European Leadership Network.
- Biscop, S. (2022). Strategic autonomy: not without integration. Policy Brief (January 2022), *Foundation for European Progressive Studies*.
- Brustlein, C. (2018). European Strategic Autonomy: Balancing Ambition and Responsibility. *Éditoriaux de l'Ifri*, ifri.
- Camporini, V., Hartley, K., Maulny, J & Zandee, D. (2017). *European Preference, Strategic Autonomy and European Defence Fund*. The Armament Industry European Research Group (Ares Group)
- Ciulla, M. & Varma, T. (2021). *The lonely leader: the origins of France's strategy for EU foreign policy*. European Council on Foreign Relations.
- Damen, M. (2022). *EU strategic autonomy 2013-2023: From concept to capacity*. EU Strategic Autonomy Monitor, European Parliamentary Research Service.
- De Bries, C. E. & Hoffmann, I. (2022). *Under Pressure: the war in Ukraine and European public opinion*. eupinions / what do you think? #2022/1, BertelsmannStiftung.
- Dempsey, J. (2022). *Ukraine Exposes Europe's Competing Narratives about Russia*. Carnegie Europe.
- Drea, E. (2022). *The EU's Balance of Power Is Shifting East*. Foreign Policy.
- EEAS (2020). *The Sinatra Doctrine. How the EU Should Deal with the*

- US-China Competition*. (https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/sinatra-doctrine-how-eu-should-deal-us%E2%80%93china-competition_en)
- Eurativ. (2018). *Merkel: Europe can no longer rely on US to 'protect' it'*. (11 May 2018).
- European Commission. (2019). *Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council: EU-China – A strategic outlook*. JOIN(2019) final, Strasbourg: European Commission.
- European Commission. (2022). *Public Opinion on the war in Ukraine. DG for Communication (DG COMM)*. (October 13, 2022). Brussels: European Commission.
- European Council. (1999). *Cologne European Council Conclusions of the Presidency*. Brussels: European Council
- European Council. (2003). *A Secure Europe in a Better World: European Security Strategy*. Brussels: European Council
- European Council. (2013). *European Council Conclusions (EUCO217/13)*. Brussels: European Council
- European Council. (2020a). 'Strategic autonomy for Europe - the aim of our generation' - speech by President Charles Michel to the Bruegel think tank'. Press Release (28 September 2020), European Council.
- European Council. (2020b). *Special meeting of the European Council (1 and 2 October 2020)*. Brussels: European Council.
- European Council. (2020c). *A recovery advancing the transition towards a more dynamic, resilient and competitive European industry: Council conclusions (16 November 2020)*. Brussels: European Council.

- Fattori, Sara. (2022). *EU strategic autonomy and the current framework of the transatlantic partnership*. Classe Internationale.
- Fiott, Daniel. (2018). Strategic autonomy: towards 'European sovereignty' in defence?. *European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS)*.
- Fiott, Daniel. (2022). The Pathway to a Sovereign Europe. A Berlin View on Foreign Affairs. *Internationale Politik Quarterly*.
- Franke, U. & Varma, T. (2019). *INDEPENDENCE PLAY: EUROPE'S PURSUIT OF STRATEGIC AUTONOMY' FLASH SCORECARD*. European Council on Foreign Relations.
- Grevi, G. (2019), *Strategic autonomy for European choices: The Key to Europe's shaping power*. European Policy Centre.
- Järvenpää, P., Major, C. & Sakkov, S. (2019). *European Strategic Autonomy*. Operationalising a Buzzword. International Centre for Defence and Security.
- Le Grand Continent. (2020). *La doctrine Macron. Une conversation avec le Président français* (The Macron Doctrine. A conversation with the French President). Le Grand Continent, published by the Groupe d'Etudes géopolitiques (20 November 2020).
- Leonard, M. et al. (2020). *A new transatlantic bargain: An action plan for transformation, not restoration*. European Council on Foreign Relations.
- Lippert, B., von Ondarza, N. & Perthes V. (eds.) (2019). *European Strategic Autonomy: Actors, Issues, Conflicts of Interests*. German Institute for International and Security Affairs.
- Lohmann, S. (2021). European Strategic Autonomy: The Test Case of Iran. *European Review of International Studies*, 8(3): 443-477.
- Odile J. (2008). *The French White Paper on Defence and National*

- Security* (Translated by ALTO). New York: Odile Jacob Publishing Corporation.
- Ouest france. (2017). *Sorbonne speech of Emmanuel Macron - Full text / English version*. (<http://international.blogs.ouest-france.fr/archive/2017/09/29/macron-sorbonne-verbatim-europe-18583.html>)
- Panda, J. (2022). *Between AUKUS and the Quad: Scaling European Interest in the Indo-Pacific*. The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies.
- Perteghella, A. (2021). *Iran: A Testing Ground for the European Union's Strategic Autonomy?*. Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI).
- POLITICO. (2022). *In historic shift, Germany ramps up defense spending due to Russia's Ukraine war*. (<https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-to-ramp-up-defense-spending-in-response-to-russias-war-on-ukraine/>)
- Retter, L. et al. (2021). *European Strategic autonomy in defence: Transatlantic visions and implications for NATO, US and EU relations*. Cambridge: RAND Corporation.
- Ryon E. (2020). European strategic autonomy: Energy at the heart of European security?. *European View*, 19(2): 238-244.
- Smith, M. E. (2018). Transatlantic security relations since the European security strategy: what role for the EU in its pursuit of strategic autonomy?. *Journal of European Integration*, 40(5): 605-620.
- Spanger, H. J. (2021). *The European Union and 'Strategic Autonomy - An Elusive Concept in the Making*. Valdai Discussion Club.
- Szewczyk, B. M. (2022). *Macron's Vision for European Autonomy Crashed and Burned in Ukraine*. Foreign Policy.
- The Guardian. (2017). *Angela Merkel: EU cannot completely rely on US and Britain any more*. (28 May 2017).

- Thompson, J. (2019). *European Strategic Autonomy and the US' CSS Analyses in Security Policy*. ETH Zurich.
- Tocci, N. (2021). *European Strategic Autonomy: What it is, Why we need it, How to achieve it*. Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).
- Van den Abeele, É. (2021). *Towards a new paradigm in open strategic autonomy?*. European Trade Union Institute.
- Vimont, P. et al. (2020). *European Strategic Autonomy in 2020*. Paris: Groupe d'études géopolitiques
- Weber, G. (2022). *French foreign and security policy under Macron: all in for European sovereignty*. UK in a Changing Europe.