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Ioana CHIȚĂ

FRANCE AND EUROPEAN STRATEGIC AUTONOMY: BETWEEN REGIONAL LEADERSHIP AND NATO COMMITMENTS

Daniel-Aurel BUCUR*

Abstract:

Amid escalating geopolitical tensions, France plays a pivotal role in shaping European security through its commitment to strategic autonomy while maintaining its NATO obligations. As one of Europe's most influential military powers, France has positioned itself as a regional leader, balancing its transatlantic commitments with its vision for a more sovereign European defence. France, a NATO founding member, has historically oscillated between transatlantic cooperation and the pursuit of an independent defence strategy. A defining moment in this regard was France's withdrawal from NATO's integrated command in 1966, under General de Gaulle, reflecting its ambition to maintain full sovereignty over its military decisions. This strategic posture, known as the Gaullio-Mitterrandism doctrine, continues to shape France's dual approach today. After decades of pragmatic cooperation, France officially rejoined NATO's integrated military structure in 2009 under President Nicolas Sarkozy, aiming to strengthen its influence within the alliance while continuing to advocate for a more self-reliant European defence.

The concept of European strategic autonomy, widely promoted by France, envisions a security framework that enables the European Union to act independently in matters of defence, economy, and technology. Initiatives such as PESCO, European Defence Fund and the Strategic Compass have been implemented to enhance Europe's military capabilities. Nevertheless, significant challenges persist: NATO remains the central pillar of security for many European Union member states, and the United States has expressed concerns about potential divergences in transatlantic defence cooperation.

Drawing on the 2022 National Strategic Review and key historical analyses, this paper examines France's dual approach—its deep-rooted commitment to NATO alongside its ambition for greater European defence autonomy. The findings highlight the inherent paradox in its strategy: while advocating for European sovereignty, France remains a key pillar of NATO's security architecture. Furthermore, the study evaluates whether France can effectively achieve its vision of a more independent European defence structure or if geopolitical realities – such as diverging strategic cultures within the European Union and controversies surrounding recent French declarations—will necessitate continued reliance on NATO. Finally, the paper assesses the long-term implications of this strategy for European security and transatlantic relations by 2030.

Keywords: *France, Gaullio-Mitterrandist doctrine, European strategic autonomy, EU-NATO relations, Defence policy.*

* PhD. student, Faculty of History and Philosophy, "Babeş-Bolyai" University, Cluj-Napoca, daniel.bucur@ubbcluj.ro

Research objectives

In this research paper, the main objective is to analyse France's role in promoting European strategic autonomy while maintaining its commitments to the North Atlantic Alliance. This dual positioning involves – reflects a long-standing tradition in French foreign policy known as Gaullo-Mitterrandism doctrine, which combines strong support for national and European sovereignty with pragmatic cooperation within NATO.

Based on this theoretical framework, the first objective is to define the concept of European strategic autonomy on the basis of the main recent theoretical and strategic contributions. A second objective is to analyse the historical and current role of France in promoting this concept, notably through its involvement in initiatives such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the European Defence Fund and the Strategic Compass. The third objective is to assess the main geopolitical challenges – including tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, the war in Ukraine and internal divergences in the European Union – that may limit France's ability to promote an autonomous European defence. The final objective is to examine the implications of the French strategy for the future of European security and transatlantic relations, with a focus on the need for in-depth coordination with European partners in the context of new strategic developments and the adaptation of the EU-NATO relationship.

Research methodology

The research is based on the following methods:

1. The descriptive method is used to identify and present the strategic initiatives promoted by France in the field of European defence;
2. The analytical method is applied to examine the role of France within the European structures and NATO, as well as the relationships between these two strategic dimensions, using the Gaullo-Mitterrandist tradition as a conceptual lens for understanding France's strategic posture;
3. The comparative method highlights the differences in vision between France and other EU Member States, such as Poland and the Baltic States, which adopt a more Atlanticist approach to security and express reservations about the idea of European strategic autonomy, preferring to base their defence on NATO commitments and the American presence in the region;

4. Documentary analysis is based on the study of primary sources (official documents of France, NATO and the European Union) and secondary sources (specialized literature, geopolitical analysis, academic and press articles).

This multi-method approach enables an integrated perspective on French strategic ambitions in a European context marked by multiple and dynamic challenges, while remaining anchored in France's unique strategic culture.

Introduction

"Allié mais non-aligné": the tradition of French strategic autonomy

France has long played a central role in promoting the idea of European strategic autonomy. This vision is part of a solid historical tradition of asserting sovereignty in the fields of defence and foreign policy, best illustrated by a doctrine known as Gaullism-Mitterrandism, formulated and theorized by Hubert Védrine, former diplomatic advisor to President François Mitterrand between 1981 and 1986, and one of the main architects of the concept of strategic autonomy applied to French foreign policy. It expresses the conviction that France must be a loyal ally, but never a subservient one. This approach presupposes a real capacity for autonomous strategic decision-making, based on its own resources, but also on political and technological influence at the European level. In the French conception, autonomy is not an isolated case, but an integral part of a geopolitical Europe that is better able to defend its interests outside the protective shadow of the United States. This was reflected in President Charles de Gaulle's decision in 1966 to withdraw France from NATO's integrated military command. This choice was based on the fundamental principle that France must retain complete freedom of judgment, decision, and action – the three dimensions that today define the concept of strategic autonomy promoted by Paris.

Strategic autonomy cannot be fully understood without first clarifying the fundamental role of sovereignty. In the European context, sovereignty refers to the ability of a state or the European Union to take autonomous decisions in areas such as defence, technology and foreign policy without undue external influence. It implies the ability to define and implement policies in accordance with its own internal priorities and strategic assessments, and not according to the agendas of other external actors.

From this perspective, strategic autonomy becomes more than a rhetorical ambition. It is the operational expression of sovereignty in a multipolar and competitive world. For France in particular, this link has deep historical roots, influenced by the Gaullist-Mitterrandist tradition, where sovereignty is not merely a legal status but a strategic necessity. European strategic autonomy implies not only institutional instruments and defence capabilities, but also a reaffirmation of Europe's capacity to act sovereign on the international stage.

This theoretical relationship between sovereignty and autonomy provides a conceptual key to understanding the rationale behind France's initiatives at the European level. It explains why autonomy, in the French vision, is inseparable from sovereignty: without the ability to decide and act independently, any aspiration to strategic autonomy remains structurally limited (Beaucillon, 2023; Védtrin, 2012). This approach also highlights the internal tension in the current European Union security architecture, which is trying to balance transatlantic dependence with a growing desire to adopt an independent strategic posture.

This doctrinal continuity combines attachment to national and European sovereignty with pragmatic cooperation within NATO. This vision was taken up and consolidated in the post-Gaule period. President François Mitterrand maintained France's doctrinal independence in the field of defence, reaffirming the importance of national nuclear deterrence and of a Europe capable of speaking with one voice. A key moment in this stance was his refusal to support the US "Star Wars program" (Strategic Defence Initiative) promoted by President Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. Unlike other US allies, Mitterrand opposed the idea of militarizing space and preferred a European strategy of balance and arms control. This gesture reinforced France's image as a sovereign actor, committed to cooperation but not automatically subject to US strategic will. Ultimately, the strategic autonomy proposed by Paris does not mean isolation or rivalry, but rather Europe's ability to face global challenges even when the transatlantic partnership is out of balance – a lesson learned from numerous tense episodes in Franco-American relations.

Later, in 2003, President Jacques Chirac refused to allow France to participate in the invasion of Iraq, expressing his veto in the UN Security Council against any resolution authorising military intervention. In a context where the United States was exerting major pressure on its NATO allies, this clear "no" to Washington and its allies forced them to act without international legal cover. This decision reaffirmed France's

commitment to international law and to the principle of decision-making autonomy within alliances.

In recent years, this strategic tradition has been revived under the presidency of Emmanuel Macron, who has claimed the Gaullist-Mitterrandist doctrine as his own since his 2017 election campaign. In his speech at the Sorbonne, he called for a "*sovereign, united, and democratic Europe*" capable of acting independently in the face of global challenges (Macron 2017). This vision was reinforced by strategic documents such as the Defence and National Security Strategic Review (DNSSR 2017) and National Strategic Review (NSR 2022), where strategic autonomy is presented not as a break with NATO, but as a necessary condition for the credibility and effectiveness of European action.

Even in the face of the controversy generated by his statements in 2023, following his official visit to China (Kauffmann 2023b), Macron reaffirmed his commitment to the idea that Europe must be a "*third pole*" of power, capable of deciding for itself on security and defence matters. In his view, strategic autonomy is not just a tactical option, but "*Europe's horizon*", its historical meaning and the condition for its ability to act in a multipolar world.

This orientation was reaffirmed in March 2025, when President Macron proposed extending French nuclear deterrence to European partners, as well as deploying troops to support a peace agreement in Ukraine (Le Monde 2025). These recent initiatives show that the French vision of strategic autonomy is not limited to a discourse of principle, but seeks to be translated into political, military, and symbolic instruments, in line with a Europe capable of acting autonomously but in a coordinated manner in the face of global uncertainties.

Nevertheless, the vision promoted by France is not uniformly shared by the other members of the European Union. Countries such as Poland and the Baltic states, which are deeply attached to NATO and the US military presence, view with reservation the idea of strategic autonomy, which could be perceived as a step towards decoupling from the collective security provided by the North Atlantic Alliance.

Thus, the French vision of strategic autonomy remains both a project of European ambition and a test of political and strategic cohesion within the European Union. Its success depends not only on France's will, but also on the Union's ability to build a common vision that combines European sovereignty with transatlantic solidarity. European strategic autonomy is not a new idea, but a project of French origin that reflects a long tradition of sovereigntist geopolitical

thinking and a constant desire to strengthen Europe's ability to act independently on the international stage.

France's initiatives for European strategic autonomy

Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)

France played a decisive role in the creation and development of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), which was officially established in December 2017. Alongside Germany, France was one of the main architects of this initiative, which was provided for in the Treaty of Lisbon but remained dormant for almost a decade. The activation of PESCO is a significant diplomatic victory for France, which, since the election of Emmanuel Macron, has stepped up its efforts to deepen European integration in the field of defence.

French diplomacy has worked hard to overcome the reluctance of some member states, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, which feared that PESCO would duplicate NATO or weaken the transatlantic alliance. France had to negotiate a compromise between its initial vision of an ambitious and selective PESCO, reserved for states willing to engage in demanding projects, and the more inclusive approach advocated by Germany and other states (Calcara and Simón 2024). This compromise resulted in a two-tier PESCO: binding commitments for all participants and specific projects in which member states participate according to their capabilities and interests.

At the operational level, France is leading or participating in several strategic projects within PESCO. Among the most important are the ESSOR (European Secure Software Defined Radio) project, which aims to develop common technologies for secure military communications. France is also piloting the EURAS space surveillance project, which is essential for Europe's strategic autonomy in an increasingly contested domain. The Eurodrone project, developed in cooperation with Germany, Italy, Spain, and the Czech Republic, reflects France's ambition to equip Europe with independent surveillance and intelligence capabilities.

For France, PESCO is not just a cooperation mechanism, but a tool for gradually transforming European strategic cultures towards a more integrated vision of common defence, while maintaining compatibility with NATO – a delicate balance that reflects France's position as an *"ally but not aligned"* (Howorth 2002).

European Defence Fund (EDF)

The European Defence Fund is another major initiative in which France has had a decisive influence. Initially proposed by the European Commission in 2016, the EDF was strongly supported by Paris, which saw it as an essential tool for financing innovation and strengthening Europe's technological autonomy.

French diplomacy was particularly active in the negotiations on the EDF budget, initially supporting a budget of €13 billion for the period 2021–2027. The final allocation of €7.3 billion, although below France's desired level, nevertheless reflects concrete recognition at the European Union level of the need to invest collectively in strengthening capacity and technological autonomy in the field of defence. (European Commission, 2021).

France's influence can also be seen in the technological orientation of the EDF. Paris has actively promoted funding for sectors considered strategic: artificial intelligence applied to defence, autonomous systems, cybersecurity, and space technologies. This focus is in line with the priorities identified in French strategic documents and aims to fill European capability gaps in areas where technological dependence on the United States or other powers is considered problematic.

The industrial dimension of the EDF is particularly important for France. The rules for allocating funds, which favour transnational European consortia, are in line with the French vision of a more integrated and less fragmented European defence technological and industrial base (EDTIB). This approach reflects France's conviction that strategic autonomy necessarily requires industrial and technological sovereignty (Ilanakiev, 2019).

Strategic Compass

Adopted in March 2022, the Strategic Compass is the first European defence white paper, providing a shared vision of threats and defining the European Union's strategic guidelines for the coming years. France played a leading role in its preparation, particularly during its Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the first half of 2022.

France's influence can be seen in several key aspects of the document. Firstly, the Strategic Compass explicitly takes up the concept of "*autonomous action*", which is dear to France, and enshrines it as a political objective of the European Union. Second, it integrates the French approach to a European defence structured around four pillars: crisis management, resilience, defence capabilities, and strategic partnerships.

One of the most emblematic proposals in the Strategic Compass, with a particular focus on security in the Mediterranean and an opening towards the Indo-Pacific, a region of strategic interest to Paris due to its overseas territories. This maritime dimension illustrates France's ambition to extend the geographical scope of European strategic action beyond the continent's immediate neighbourhood.

Other significant initiatives

Beyond the institutional structures of the European Union, France has launched several complementary initiatives aimed at strengthening Europe's strategic autonomy. The European Intervention Initiative (EI2), proposed by President Emmanuel Macron in his speech at the Sorbonne in September 2017 and formalized in June 2018, is a significant example. Bringing together thirteen European states, including the post-Brexit United Kingdom, EI2 aims to develop a common strategic culture and facilitate joint military commitments, independently of the structures of the European Union or NATO (Ministry of the Armed Forces 2021).

In response to the war in Ukraine, France has been at the forefront of promoting the concept of a "*war economy*". At the European Union Defence Conference held in Brussels in February 2023, President Emmanuel Macron called for a profound transformation of the European defence industry to drastically increase production capacity. This initiative, inspired by the EDIDP (European Defence Industrial Development Program), aims to remedy the structural weaknesses highlighted by the Ukrainian conflict: insufficient ammunition stocks, vulnerable supply chains, and limited production capacities (Macron 2017).

More recently, in March 2025, President Emmanuel Macron proposed extending France's nuclear deterrence to its European partners as part of a "*strategic dialogue*" on the role of France's strike force in defending the continent. This proposal, which echoes similar suggestions made during François Mitterrand's presidency, illustrates France's desire to assert its strategic leadership in Europe, building on its status as the European Union's sole nuclear power since Brexit (Melander and Rose 2025).

Analysis of French strategic documents

Strategic Analysis of National Defence and Security (2017)

Published a few months after Emmanuel Macron's election, the 2017 Strategic Analysis marks a turning point in the French conceptualization of European autonomy. The document establishes a

direct link between French national sovereignty and the construction of a more strategically autonomous Europe.

For France, the analysis defines Europe as a *"power multiplier"*, emphasizing that *"the defence of Europe also involves building European strategic autonomy, complementary to the Atlantic Alliance"* (DNSSR 2017). This nuanced wording reflects the balance that France is trying to maintain between its European commitment and its participation in NATO.

The analysis of transatlantic relations in this document is particularly revealing. Without questioning the fundamental importance of NATO for European security, the assessment highlights a strategic uncertainty linked to the evolution of US foreign policy, particularly since the election of Donald Trump and the start of his term in 2017. Perceived as unpredictable and sometimes critical of the Alliance, this new context has fuelled fears in France of a possible withdrawal of US commitment to Europe. Consequently, the document justifies the need to accelerate European efforts to strengthen its own defence capabilities as a form of insurance against possible repositioning by its transatlantic partner.

In terms of capabilities, the review identifies several priority areas that France will then promote within European initiatives: intelligence, cyber defence, missile defence, force projection, and resilience to hybrid threats. These priorities reflect the ambition for a comprehensive European defence capable of operating across the entire spectrum of contemporary threats.

Strategic update (2021) and national review (2022)

The 2021 strategic update, followed by the 2022 national strategic review, reflects an intensification of French discourse on European strategic autonomy in the face of an increasingly unstable international environment. These documents incorporate the lessons learned from several major crises: the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed the vulnerabilities of strategic supply chains, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which marked the return of conventional warfare to Europe.

The 2022 review considerably broadens the concept of strategic autonomy, which is no longer limited to defence but now encompasses energy, technology, industry, and health. This holistic approach is presented as a necessity in the face of strategic competition between major powers, which *"is now taking place in all areas and involves all actors"* (NSR 2022).

The document also introduces a more pragmatic approach to EU-NATO relations. While the ambition for autonomy remains intact, France

recognizes that, in the short term, the Russian threat reinforces the importance of the US security umbrella for Europe. Strategic autonomy is therefore presented as a medium-term objective to be pursued in parallel with the strengthening of the European pillar of NATO.

The 2022 analysis attaches particular importance to contested spaces (cyberspace, space, the seabed) and critical technologies (semiconductors, artificial intelligence, quantum technology), identified as areas where European autonomy is particularly threatened. This analysis has had a direct influence on France's proposals at European level, particularly with regard to the orientation of EDF funding and the industrial defence strategy.

Assessment of the practical impact of France's proposals

Tangible achievements

The assessment of the practical impact of the initiatives promoted by France shows that, beyond the declaratory dimension, there is real progress towards European strategic autonomy. At the institutional level, the launch of PESCO and the operationalization of the EDF have strengthened the framework for defence cooperation, and France's role in shaping these instruments has been decisive.

From a strategic point of view, the adoption of the Strategic Compass marked an important step towards a common vision at European level. France has succeeded in incorporating its guidelines into this document, from the idea of "autonomous capacity to act" to the emphasis on the southern neighbourhood and the Indo-Pacific region. At the same time, the proposal for a European rapid reaction force by 2025 confirms the transition from principles to instruments.

On the industrial front, projects such as Future Combat Air System (FCAS) and Eurodrone—already mentioned above—reflect the desire to reduce dependence on non-European technologies. Even if these programs are marked by coordination difficulties, they remain a sign of the maturing of European cooperation in critical areas (Ilanakiev 2019).

In terms of operational capabilities, France has demonstrated its ability to initiate and lead European missions in diverse contexts: in the Sahel, through Task Force Takuba, and in the Mediterranean, through the IRINI naval operation. Although not all of these have reached their intended scale, they demonstrate Europe's potential for strategic projection in its immediate neighbourhood.

The balance sheet is therefore mixed: French initiatives have catalysed a number of relevant changes in the European defence

architecture, but their implementation is often hampered by political resistance, budgetary constraints, and the lack of a robust strategic consensus at the EU level.

Constraints and obstacles

Despite this progress, several obstacles limit the impact of French initiatives. Considerable political resistance persists, particularly from member states that favour an Atlanticist approach to security. Poland and the Baltic states, in particular, are skeptical about the idea of European strategic autonomy, which they see as potentially weakening NATO's guarantees against the Russian threat.

In financial terms, the resources available are often disproportionate to the ambitions set. Although important instruments such as the European Defence Fund have been launched, the resources available do not, in their current form, allow for the desired qualitative leap in common strategic capabilities. In addition, most member states continue to fall short of the 2% of GDP target for defence spending, despite repeated calls from France.

There are also contradictions between rhetoric and practice: although France promotes the integration of the European defence industry, its arms exports often favour national interests. Similarly, simultaneous support for initiatives within and outside the EU framework – such as PESCO and the IEI – raises questions about Paris's strategic coherence.

Finally, Europe's structural dependence on US capabilities remains pronounced in key areas: reconnaissance satellites, strategic transport, and missile defence. This technical and operational reality objectively limits the full applicability of the concept of European strategic autonomy, even in its pragmatic version.

Partner perceptions

The reception of French initiatives varies considerably from one European partner to another. Germany, despite its strong attachment to the transatlantic framework, has gradually moved closer to the French position on the need for greater European autonomy, particularly since the Australian submarine crisis in 2021, which shook confidence in the American partnership.

On the other hand, Central and Eastern European countries, as well as some Nordic countries, continue to view with suspicion what they see as an attempt by France to impose its geopolitical vision on the Union as a whole. The proposal to extend France's nuclear deterrence, in

particular, has met with mixed reactions, with some considering it an inadequate alternative to US guarantees (Tisdall 2025).

On the American side, the Biden administration has adopted a more conciliatory approach than its predecessor towards European defence initiatives, expressing support for strengthening European capabilities as long as they remain compatible with NATO and contribute to a fair burden-sharing. Nevertheless, significant reservations remain regarding the industrial and technological dimension of strategic autonomy, which is sometimes perceived as protectionist and potentially contrary to US commercial interests (Besch 2021).

Internationally, Russia and China are closely monitoring the development of European strategic autonomy. For Moscow, these initiatives are generally seen as a means of reducing US influence in Europe, which could theoretically serve Russia's interests. Beijing, for its part, sees the emergence of a more autonomous Europe as a potential counterweight to American hegemony in a multipolar world, while expressing concern about a possible consolidation of the Western bloc (Sabanadze and al. 2024).

An interim assessment

The results of France's initiatives in favour of European strategic autonomy are mixed. On the one hand, Paris has undeniably succeeded in putting this concept on the European agenda and giving it substance through significant institutional progress (PESCO, EDF, the Strategic Compass). France's conceptual influence on the definition of European strategic guidelines has been considerably strengthened.

On the other hand, there is still a significant gap between stated ambitions and concrete achievements. Europe remains largely dependent on US security guarantees, particularly in the context of the Russian threat, and autonomous European capabilities are still in their infancy in many key areas.

Nevertheless, French initiatives have contributed to a European awareness of the need for greater strategic resilience. The war in Ukraine, Sino-US tensions, and political uncertainties in the United States have gradually convinced even the most Atlanticist member states that Europe must strengthen its capacity for autonomous action, at least as an "insurance policy" against geopolitical dangers.

In the short term, the dynamics seem to favour continued efforts toward greater strategic autonomy, but with a pragmatic approach that recognizes current constraints and the need to maintain a strong transatlantic partnership. Ultimately, this evolution fits quite well with

the French vision of autonomy "not against NATO, but within NATO" (Védrine 2012), reflecting the Gaullist principle of *being an ally, but not aligned*.

European reactions and differences

France's proposal on European strategic sovereignty has sparked contrasting reactions from member states, revealing divergent views on the security architecture of the European continent.

Mapping member states' positions

Member states' positions on strategic autonomy can be grouped into three broad categories.

The first group, in favour of a more autonomous Europe, includes France, Spain, Italy, and Greece. These Mediterranean states actively support the strengthening of European capabilities, given both the instability in their southern neighbourhood and their own security interests. Greece's position is emblematic: it supports the French vision of strategic autonomy, as demonstrated by the defence agreement signed with France on September 28, 2021. This agreement provides not only for deeper military cooperation, but also for the purchase of Belhara frigates and Rafale multi-role aircraft. Nevertheless, this European orientation coexists with a strengthened strategic partnership with the United States, as evidenced by the renewal of the bilateral defence agreement in 2019 and the expansion of the US military presence in Greece. This ambivalent position is largely explained by the perception of Turkey – a NATO member – as a direct threat to Greece's security. The Greek case thus illustrates how regional geopolitical considerations have a concrete influence on member states' positions on the idea of European strategic autonomy (Mitsotakis 2021).

An intermediate group, consisting of Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands, takes a more nuanced position. These countries support the development of European capabilities while insisting on complementarity with NATO. Germany, in particular, embodies this ambivalence: despite announcing a "Zeitenwende" and an exceptional €100 billion defence fund in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Berlin has largely focused its procurement on American equipment, notably the F-35 (Malté and al. 2022; Le Monde 2022).

A third group, consisting mainly of Poland, the Baltic states, and other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, strongly favours the transatlantic framework. For these nations, the American guarantee is

a vital insurance against Russian threats, and any initiative that could weaken NATO arouses instinctive mistrust.

Disagreements between the French vision and the Atlanticist approach

Several doctrinal rifts explain these disagreements. The very concept of relations with NATO pits the French vision of independent action against the fear of transatlantic decoupling among the most Atlanticist countries. President Emmanuel Macron's statements on the "brain death" of NATO in 2019 crystallized these tensions, provoking strong reactions in Central and Eastern Europe (The Economist 2019).

Strategic priorities also differ significantly: while countries on the eastern flank focus on deterring Russia, France has historically paid more attention to threats from the south (terrorism, regional instability). Although the war in Ukraine has partially reduced this divergence, priorities remain different.

Another point of difference is the industrial dimension. Countries with a big industrial and tech base in defence (France, Italy, Spain) have a direct interest in promoting European preference, unlike importing countries, which often prefer American equipment because of cost and immediate interoperability.

Case studies reveal

Poland is a perfect illustration of the reluctance to accept the French concept of strategic autonomy. After its historical experience with Russia, Warsaw considers the American guarantee to be non-negotiable. Poland has invested heavily in its defence (almost 4% of GDP), favouring US equipment such as F-35s, Patriot systems, Abrams tanks (The Economic Times 2023). Nevertheless, Poland participates pragmatically in certain European projects, such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), revealing a selective approach guided by its national interests.

Germany presents a different but equally revealing case. Berlin feels torn between its ambition to become a European leader and its dependence on the United States for security. This tension can be seen in the difficulties of the Future Combat Air System (FCAS) project with France, where industrial differences reflect different strategic conceptions. Germany currently favours a vision of open strategic autonomy, seeking to reconcile European consolidation with transatlantic solidarity (Major and Mölling 2020).

The Baltic states, despite their deep attachment to NATO, show some nuances. Estonia is particularly involved in discussions on European digital sovereignty, an area in which it has recognized expertise, while Lithuania actively supports the European military mobility initiative, which complements NATO's efforts (Wright 2021; Šešelgytė 2018).

Structural determining factors

These national positions are largely explained by deep-rooted structural factors. Historical legacy plays a decisive role: the experience of Soviet domination for Central and Eastern European countries contrasts with France's tradition of strategic independence. Geography also has a direct influence on these perceptions, with proximity to Russia naturally reinforcing the importance attached to the US guarantee.

National strategic cultures differ fundamentally: the French tradition of external intervention and global status differs considerably from the defensive territorial approach favoured by several member states. These conceptual differences transcend traditional political divisions and persist beyond changes of government.

Despite these differences, the war in Ukraine has encouraged the emergence of a renewed pragmatism. A minimal consensus is emerging around concrete projects such as military mobility and cyber defence, which allows progress to be made on the technical aspects of strategic autonomy while temporarily avoiding deeper conceptual disagreements. This gradual approach, which favours concrete achievements over major theoretical debates, characterizes the recent evolution of the European debate on strategic sovereignty.

Discussions

NATO-EU relations: complementarity or rivalry?

The relationship between NATO and the European Union is the real Gordian knot in the debate on European strategic autonomy. Far from being a mere technical and institutional issue, this relationship encapsulates the fundamental tensions between the aspiration for European sovereignty and the realities of transatlantic cooperation. France, the main promoter of strategic autonomy, consistently argues that this should not be a break with NATO, but rather a strengthening of Europe's ability to act when necessary. Nevertheless, for some member states and analysts, the French vision risks fuelling perceptions of

institutional rivalry with NATO, highlighting fundamental differences on the future of the continent's security architecture.

Analysis of the concept of "open strategic autonomy"

The concept of "strategic autonomy" has evolved significantly since its emergence. Initially limited to the military sphere in the 2010s, it has gradually expanded to encompass other dimensions. As highlighted in the article *Toute l'Europe*, "the Covid-19 pandemic has changed the rules of the game, exposing European dependencies" (Lictevout 2020), extending the concept to include health, technological, and economic aspects.

The addition of the adjective "open" in 2020, at the instigation of the German Presidency of the European Union, marks an attempt to reconcile French ambitions for independence with the concerns of the most Atlanticist countries. While this formulation has allowed a diplomatic convergence, it has also introduced ambiguity in defining the true extent of independence envisioned by France. This qualification explicitly signals that this autonomy is part of a partnership framework, particularly with NATO and the United States, and does not aim at strategic autarky. As High Representative Josep Borell stated, *„Enhancing our strategic autonomy goes hand in glove with the strengthening of our relations with partners.”* (European Defence Agency 2020).

Nevertheless, there are inherent ambiguities in this compromise wording. For supporters of a classic French vision, it risks diluting the initial ambition of decision-making independence. For staunch Atlanticists, autonomy, even "open," continues to suggest a potential weakening of NATO's primacy. The polysemy of the term certainly allows for political progress, but at the cost of some conceptual confusion.

President Emmanuel Macron has linked this concept to that of *"European sovereignty,"* stating that *"our Europe [...] must acquire greater strategic autonomy,"* (Macron 2024) particularly in the area of defence. This association between sovereignty and strategic autonomy reinforces the political dimension of the concept, beyond its military and capacity aspects.

Assessment of the compatibility of European initiatives with NATO

The compatibility of European defence initiatives with NATO is the subject of divergent assessments, reflecting underlying tensions related to strategic autonomy.

Permanent Structured Cooperation (PSC), although initially presented as complementary to NATO, has raised concerns about possible duplication. As a result, the first PSC projects were carefully selected to fill capability gaps identified by NATO, such as military mobility. The latter, dubbed the "military Schengen," illustrates the potential for complementarity: NATO defines infrastructure standards, while the European Union finances and develops cross-border road and rail networks.

The European Defence Fund (EDF), with a budget of €7.3 billion for the period 2021-2027, has become a focal point of debate: some present it as a tool to strengthen NATO's European pillar, while others fear that its rules – especially on "third countries" participations – overly favour the European defence industrial base and disadvantage transatlantic partners. (European Commission 2023; Santopinto 2025)

In its military dimension, European strategic autonomy generally refers to the EU's capacity to act autonomously in defence, while remaining able to cooperate with partners (Damen 2022). Nevertheless, this ambition faces potential contradictions between the development of a European defence industrial and technological base and the imperatives of interoperability with NATO, where American standards prevail.

The American perception of French ambitions

The American perception of European initiatives for strategic autonomy has evolved considerably since the early 2000s, oscillating between mistrust and conditional encouragement.

The Bush administration expressed significant reservations about the first European defence initiatives, fearing the "3Ds": decoupling, duplication, and discrimination (towards allies outside the EU). This mistrust crystallized during the Iraq crisis in 2003, pitting the "old Europe" against the more Atlanticist "new Europe" (Hunter 2002).

The Obama administration adopted a more nuanced position, encouraging greater burden-sharing while maintaining reservations on certain industrial issues. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made US support conditional on strategic autonomy that would strengthen NATO rather than compete with it.

Paradoxically, the arrival of Donald Trump has helped legitimize discussions on European strategic autonomy. His virulent criticism of NATO and his pressure on allies have reinforced the French argument for the need for strategic assurance. As President Macron pointed out, *"The paradox would be that, at the moment when we implement the elements of*

genuine European strategic autonomy, we start following US policy out of a kind of panic reflex." (Da Sois 2023).

The Biden administration has proposed a more sophisticated approach, verbally supported a strengthened European defence pillar while maintained precise "red lines." The letter sent by the Pentagon to the European Commission in 2021, expressing concern about US companies' access to the FED, illustrates this ambivalent position. Washington supports a more capable Europe militarily but remains vigilant on industrial and commercial issues.

Recent geopolitical developments, notably the war in Ukraine, have temporarily brought the transatlantic partners closer together around a common goal. Nevertheless, structural differences remain, fuelled by competing industrial interests and different visions of the international order.

The economic and industrial dimension of strategic autonomy, highlighted in the above-mentioned article *Toute l'Europe*, is currently a major point of divergence. The European Union is seeking to "protect European companies and strategic sectors" from potentially hostile foreign investment, in particular through the foreign investment screening mechanism adopted in 2019, which may come into tension with US economic interests in Europe.

This complex relationship between NATO and the EU reflects deeper questions about the future of the transatlantic link. European strategic autonomy thus lies at the intersection of geopolitical, economic, and identity considerations that go far beyond the technical aspects of defence. It fundamentally raises the question of the role Europe intends to play on the international stage and its relationship with its American ally in a rapidly changing multipolar world.

The structural challenges of European autonomy

The ambition for European strategic autonomy faces several fundamental obstacles that go beyond mere circumstantial considerations. These structural challenges, rooted in the industrial, cultural, and political realities of the continent, require a systematic approach to be overcome.

Industrial capabilities and constraints

Despite consolidation efforts, the European defence industrial landscape remains fragmented. This fragmentation leads to costly redundancies, with several countries developing similar systems without pooling resources. The absence of a genuine single defence market limits

economies of scale and undermines the competitiveness of European companies on global markets (Clapp and al. 2025).

Critical technological dependencies persist in strategic areas such as advanced semiconductors, certain weapon systems, and essential electronic components. These vulnerabilities compromise Europe's decision-making and operational autonomy, particularly in crisis situations. In addition, Europe lags far behind in disruptive technologies—artificial intelligence, quantum, advanced space – that will define tomorrow's military capabilities.

Insufficient interoperability between the equipment of different national armed forces is also a major obstacle to joint effectiveness, limiting the capacity for collective action in the face of threats.

Divergent strategic cultures

Europe is characterized by a mosaic of strategic cultures shaped by history, geography, and national experience. These differences can be seen even in the perception of priority threats: Eastern European countries generally consider Russia to be their main security concern, while Mediterranean countries are more concerned about instability in the Middle East and North Africa.

This heterogeneity is also reflected in attitudes toward NATO and the United States. Central and Eastern European countries often favour the American security guarantee, while others, led by France, advocate greater European autonomy. National traditions regarding the use of force differ profoundly: countries such as France and the United Kingdom have an interventionist strategic culture and extensive experience in foreign operations, while others take a more reserved approach to the use of military force. These conceptual differences complicate the emergence of a common strategic vision, which is essential for any real European autonomy.

Budgetary constraints and political will

Despite growing awareness of the need to invest in defence, accelerated by the conflict in Ukraine, overall European defence investment remains insufficient to support real strategic autonomy. There are considerable disparities between Member States, with some reaching or exceeding the NATO target of 2% of GDP, while others remain well below this target.

The mobilization of common resources to finance major capability programs faces deep-rooted political reluctance. National budgetary decisions often tend to favour other priorities perceived as

more urgent by public opinion. Defence is still largely considered a national prerogative, which makes it difficult to pool efforts.

These financial constraints come against a tense economic backdrop marked by post-pandemic debt and the challenges of the green transition, which are creating competition for limited resources. European strategic autonomy requires sustained political will that transcends electoral cycles, something that is still lacking in many Member States.

Outlook for 2030

Prospective analysis of possible developments

The evolution of strategic autonomy by 2030 could follow several trajectories, depending on internal and external factors. In short, the European Union appears to be committed to a gradual strengthening of its autonomous capabilities, driven by recent geopolitical tensions. The European Defence Fund and the European Peace Fund testify to an institutional determination to increase common resources.

Recent developments confirm this dynamic. In February 2025, the European Commission launched the first call for proposals under the European Defence Investment Program (EDIP), mobilizing €1.5 billion until 2027 for the joint production of high-priority military equipment. This initiative demonstrates an awareness of the crucial role of EU funding in complementing national efforts. It marks an important step towards the development of a more integrated and competitive European defence industry capable of meeting the capability needs of Member States.

Between now and 2030, there are three main paths forward. The first would be a substantial acceleration of defence integration, with the effective creation of a genuine European rapid reaction force and the implementation of major joint capability programs such as FCAS (Future Combat Air System) or NGCS (Main Ground Combat System). This development would enable Europe to assert itself as a coherent strategic actor.

The second, more modest trajectory would consist of "variable geometry autonomy," in which groups of member states would move forward together in specific areas while maintaining the current security architecture, which is largely dependent on NATO. This pragmatic approach could lead to the emergence of European "coalitions of the willing" on specific issues.

The third, more pessimistic trajectory would see European efforts fragment in the face of economic pressures and persistent strategic divergences, compromising ambitions for autonomy.

The factors determining the success of strategic autonomy

The degree of strategic autonomy achieved by Europe in 2030 will depend on several critical factors. First, the political coherence of Member States and their ability to define common strategic interests. Without a minimum consensus on priority threats and the means to respond to them, efforts will remain fragmented and ineffective.

The level of financial investment is a second determining factor. Joint European investments are beginning to materialize through flagship programs such as EDIP and the €1.5 billion for the period 2025-2027 to stimulate joint production of priority defence equipment. This initiative demonstrates an awareness of the crucial role of EU funding in complementing national efforts. Nevertheless, the scale of these investments will need to increase significantly in the coming years to meet the ambitions for strategic autonomy, particularly in the face of challenges related to technological innovation and the need to modernize Europe's armed forces.

The success of this quest for autonomy will also depend on strengthening Europe's defence technological and industrial base. The EDIP program aims precisely to address the critical defence capability shortfalls identified, while strengthening this industrial base. Without competitive and integrated industrial capabilities, Europe will remain dependent on external suppliers for critical equipment. Progress in emerging technologies (cyber, space, AI) will be particularly decisive.

A significant breakdown in transatlantic relations or increased instability at Europe's borders could act as a catalyst for autonomy efforts, while a strengthening of US engagement could, conversely, slow down the process.

Conclusions

European strategic autonomy is now not just a theoretical concept or a political aspiration, but a necessity imposed by an increasingly volatile international context. France, through its Gaullist-Mitterrandist tradition and the initiatives it has launched in recent decades, has established itself as the main promoter of this idea, succeeding in profoundly influencing the European Union's strategic agenda. From the

launch of PESCO and the EDF to the adoption of the Strategic Compass and the initiation of discussions on extended nuclear deterrence, Paris has consistently sought to transform Europe into an autonomous actor capable of responding to global challenges without relying exclusively on the American security umbrella.

Nevertheless, the road to autonomy is strewn with major structural and political obstacles: fragmentation of defence industries, cultural and strategic divergences between member states, budgetary hesitations, and the lack of a clear consensus on the future of the transatlantic relationship. Furthermore, the perception of partners – whether European, American or strategic rivals – remains ambivalent, oscillating between conditional support and suspicion.

In this complex equation, France plays an essential role, but not one that is sufficient on its own. The future of European strategic autonomy will depend on the Union's ability to move forward collectively, through concrete initiatives, sustained investment, and a shared vision of its role in the multipolar world of the 21st century. In this perspective, what is at stake is not only operational autonomy, but the definition of Europe's geopolitical identity in the coming decades.

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Ediția actuală își extinde participarea la un spectru mai larg de contributori, incluzând atât doctoranzi, cât și studenți din programele de master, cu un interes crescut pentru domenii precum intelligence, securitate națională, istorie și relații internaționale.

Organizarea conferinței a fost posibilă datorită eforturilor continue ale doctoranzilor și ale conducătorilor de doctorat din cadrul Școlii Doctorale Intelligence și Securitate a ANIMV.

Anticipăm cu entuziasm noi discuții și schimburi de idei în viitoarea ediție a conferinței.



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