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STRATEGIC AUTONOMY, STRATEGIC CHOICES

Strategic autonomy is not a new concept, but it has recently taken centre stage in European public and policy debate, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted Europe's vulnerabilities in key strategic sectors. In the current debate, 'strategic autonomy' has been defined in different ways, often focusing on what it is *not*, rather than on what it is. Political leaders have generally avoided entering into definitional debates, which have sometimes been regarded even as a hindrance to substantive discussions.

This paper, on the other hand, makes three main arguments: firstly, that there are important lessons to be drawn from the different definitions of 'strategic autonomy', and that a common understanding of its content is necessary in order to have a meaningful debate, and to avoid misconceptions and disagreements rooted in misunderstanding; secondly, that 'strategic autonomy' must be understood in the context of parallel (if not similar) policies pursued by other major international players; and thirdly, that the operationalisation of 'strategic autonomy' requires explicit strategic choices at the highest political level, taking into account not only its expected benefits, but also crucially its costs. Failure to make these choices would risk trivialising the notion of 'strategic autonomy' and reducing it to a mere buzzword, which could have harmful repercussions for the European project.

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FRAMING THE DEBATE

‘Strategic autonomy’ is not a new concept. Its origins can be traced back at least to the 1998 St. Malo Declaration, and the phrase itself has been part of official EU policy discourse at least since the 2013 Council Conclusions on Common Security and Defence Policy¹, and more prominently since its use in the 2016 EU Global Strategy². The notion originated in the field of security and defence, but it has recently been expanded to cover virtually every EU policy with an external dimension. The Strategic Agenda 2019-2024, for example, calls broadly for the EU to ‘increase its capacity to act autonomously to safeguard its interests, uphold its values and way of life, and help shape the global future’³. Recent European Council Conclusions identify ‘achieving strategic autonomy while preserving an open economy’ as a ‘key objective of the Union’⁴, particularly in the context of post-COVID-19 recovery.

This notion, however vaguely defined, has not remained confined to EU policy documents. Instead, it has **spilled over into public debate**, involving top-level politicians as well as journalists and experts. In recent months, the debate has been rekindled by a ‘virtual’ exchange between Germany’s Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer and French President Emmanuel Macron, with the former calling in *Politico*⁵ for an end to ‘illusions of European strategic autonomy’, and the latter defending the concept in an interview with *Le Grand Continent*⁶. Views have diverged not only on the concept, but even on the value of the debate itself. Some commentators have seen it as a positive contribution to the emergence of a European public space⁷ where such thorny political issues can be openly addressed. Others have described it as a ‘war of words’⁸ or even as a ‘toxic quibble’⁹ devoid of any real substance.

Arguments over the distinction between ‘strategic autonomy’ and the earlier formula ‘European sovereignty’, or over the use of qualifiers such as ‘open’, are too easily dismissed as mere linguistics. In fact, they underline the existence of deep and unresolved sensitivities in Member States. In his 2018

speech at the Bundestag, for example, President Macron noted that the word ‘sovereignty’ has different cultural connotations in France and Germany, which go beyond its simple meaning¹⁰. Already in the early 1990s, commentators on EU foreign policy deliberately avoided using the word ‘sovereignty’ to indicate the nature of the EU as an autonomous international actor, because of ‘the spectre of statehood which the term raises’¹¹. The word ‘autonomy’, on the other hand, elicits fears of unilateralism and autarky. The adjective ‘open’ (as in ‘open strategic autonomy’), while trying to assuage those fears, in fact risks serving as a reminder of those very concerns.

It is not surprising, then, that much of the public discourse on ‘strategic autonomy’ seems to have focused on **clarifying what strategic autonomy is not**. In one form or another, most commentators have noted that strategic autonomy is:

- *not* to be confused with autarky, protectionism, isolationism, or unilateralism;
- *not* a rejection of NATO or of the transatlantic alliance;
- *not* limited to the field of security and defence, but also relevant to (most) other policy areas;
- *not* only about resilience and self-reliance (defensive), but also about promoting EU interests and values (offensive);
- *not* a goal in itself, but rather a means to an end.

This ‘negative’ or ‘defensive’ definitional approach has permeated the policy debate even at Council level¹², and is clearly due, at least in part, to the need to address the sensitivities raised by the ‘semantic baggage’¹³ of the phrase. On the other hand, it also seems to be a symptom of an **intrinsic ambiguity** which lends itself to negative interpretations. Indeed, ‘strategic autonomy’ fulfils many of the criteria for what academics would describe as an ‘essentially contested concept’¹⁴.

Given this state of affairs, and the fluidity of the ongoing debate, definitive answers or even sectoral policy recommendations are beyond the limited

scope of this Issues Paper. This analysis aims rather to provide some conceptual clarity, to raise some questions which appear to have been largely overlooked in the debate, and to consider their implications, especially for the role of the European Council. **This paper makes three arguments:**

1. Trying to reach a definition of 'strategic autonomy' may be a hindrance to a substantial policy debate. However, at least **a common understanding is possible and necessary.**
2. This common understanding should be **rooted in the international context** which informed the recent 'strategic autonomy' debate.
3. This understanding **calls for balanced choices at the highest political level, taking into account the costs as well as the benefits** of strategic autonomy. Otherwise, 'strategic autonomy' risks becoming a buzzword open to criticism, instrumentalisation, and unfulfillable expectations.

ONE CONCEPT, MANY DEFINITIONS

In their contributions to the 'strategic autonomy' debate, EU leaders have generally preferred to avoid linguistic and definitional questions, and tried to focus instead on the 'substance' of strategic autonomy. This approach is understandable and perhaps even commendable at the political level, where **a certain degree of 'constructive ambiguity' can be useful** to drive processes forward. From an analytical point of view **however, there are lessons to be learned from reviewing the different definitions** adopted in expert literature.

The meaning of the word 'autonomy' is not particularly problematic, despite the sensitivities referred to above which it may raise. It has been understood generally as the ability to set one's own course and self-regulate (from its etymological roots), or as a situation of 'less dependence, more influence'¹⁵. Adding more depth to the analysis, Daniel Fiott distinguished between autonomy as

'freedom to act' and autonomy as 'freedom from dependencies', and pointed out that 'autonomy is not a binary choice (of either having autonomy or not) but rather a spectrum that represents different degrees of autonomy and dependency'¹⁶.

This important aspect of strategic autonomy has been reiterated several times. For example, in a paper on strategic autonomy and the use of force, Sven Biscop suggested that the EU should aim to 'strengthen its strategic autonomy', or to achieve 'a significant degree of strategic autonomy' or even 'full strategic autonomy', depending on the specific field and timeframe under consideration¹⁷. In a paper on strategic autonomy and digital technology, the in-house think tank of the European Commission clarified that 'in practical terms' strategic autonomy involves **'a balancing act on a spectrum ranging from absolute self-sufficiency or autarky to full dependence'**¹⁸. Finally, Giovanni Grevi highlighted the aspirational and progressive nature of this understanding of autonomy, noting that it is 'a matter of degree. Full autonomy is, in many cases, unachievable and not necessarily desirable, but progress can be achieved to make Europe more self-reliant in advancing its interests and values'¹⁹.

On the other hand, **the adjective 'strategic' has been understood in at least three different ways.** In its original interpretation, 'strategic' was little more than a synonym for 'military', with the result that strategic autonomy could be understood simply **as 'the ability to use military force autonomously'**²⁰. This basic concept could then be broken down analytically in its three dimensions of political, operational, and industrial autonomy²¹. Even within a broader understanding of security and defence, strategic autonomy was largely seen as referring to 'hard power instruments'²². This reading can be drawn directly from the 2016 EU Global Strategy, which described strategic autonomy as 'important for Europe's ability to foster peace and safeguard security'²³, but it had already existed in academic literature for years²⁴. It is within this discourse that criticisms of strategic autonomy as an isolationist or unilateralist concept first emerged, and were countered by both scholars and political leaders who argued that Europe can only achieve strategic autonomy through NATO, and can only remain

relevant to NATO through strategic autonomy²⁵. Significantly, that appears to be the only meaning that Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer had in mind in her recent article in *Politico*, where she noted that ‘Europe remains dependent on U.S. military protection’ and ‘will not be able to replace America’s crucial role as a security provider’²⁶.

In contrast to this narrow definition, ‘strategic’ can be understood more broadly **as relating to ‘the core interests of a political community’**²⁷. Strategic autonomy in this second sense is ‘about means and tools to reduce external dependencies in areas deemed strategic’²⁸, or in ‘areas in which ... dependence on others could lead to a loss of sovereignty’²⁹. This interpretation has largely superseded the earlier narrow ‘military’ definition of ‘strategic’, pushed by global events which showed the extent of Europe’s vulnerabilities in areas ranging from health (through the COVID-19 pandemic) to international finance (witness the reaction of European companies to US threats following Washington’s withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal). This broader understanding of ‘strategic autonomy’ seems to come closer to the views expressed by Emmanuel Macron in his interview with *Le Grand Continent*, and one might ask to what extent political disagreements are the result of different understandings of the terms of the debate.

The third definition is more ‘analytical’, and it arguably derives from the classic Clausewitzian understanding of strategy **as the relation between ends and means**. Thus, strategic autonomy has been defined as ‘the ability to set one’s own priorities and make one’s own decisions in matters of foreign policy and security, together with the institutional, political and material wherewithal to carry these

through’³⁰, or ‘the ability of European states to set their own priorities and make their own decisions in matters of foreign policy, security and defence, and have the means to implement these decisions’³¹. More succinctly, Giovanni Grevi states that ‘the essence of strategic autonomy is [that Europeans] should have a purpose of their own and a stronger power base to fulfil it’³². In response to concerns about isolationism or unilateralism, these definitions usually include also phrases such as ‘alone or in cooperation with third parties’. Grevi’s definition is also particularly interesting insofar as it does not refer exclusively to external action. In fact, as he further clarifies, strategic autonomy is not only a foreign policy issue, but rather one that involves ‘preserving and deepening European integration itself’³³.

As noted at the outset of this paper, ‘strategic autonomy’ is not a new concept. The 1998 St. Malo Declaration, for example, already called for the EU to have ‘the capacity for autonomous action, backed by credible military forces’. Is ‘strategic autonomy’ simply the latest reiteration of that call, together with its extension to other issue areas? This brief review of its different definitions allows one to draw some **key lessons from the current debate** (see box below), but a single operational definition remains elusive. Furthermore, looking at it in the light of decades of political declarations and academic discussions on Europe’s autonomy and international actorness, one might be left with the impression that the concept of ‘strategic autonomy’ could be little more than ‘old wine in new bottles’. A more substantial understanding of strategic autonomy, and of its elements of novelty, needs to **consider why the debate (re-)emerged at this point in time, in this particular international context**.

STRATEGIC AUTONOMY: KEY LESSONS FROM THE DEFINITIONAL DEBATE

Strategic autonomy has been defined (1) narrowly, as the capacity for autonomous military action; (2) broadly, as the reduction of external dependencies in 'strategic' areas; and (3) analytically, as the ability to set one's own ends while having the means to achieve them.

Some key lessons can be drawn from the definitional debate on strategic autonomy.

Firstly, if autonomy is conceived of as 'a spectrum ranging from full self-sufficiency to full dependence', it follows that the nature and level of 'optimal' strategic autonomy may vary from one policy area to another; and that an 'optimal' level of strategic autonomy may not coincide necessarily with its 'maximum' level.

Secondly, it is not enough to state that strategic autonomy is *not* a rejection of multilateral cooperation; instead, it should be stressed that the EU can only contribute to effective multilateralism if it develops its own capacity for strategic autonomy, and conversely that an effective multilateral order is a condition for Europe to fully develop its strategic autonomy: each depends on the other.

Thirdly, a constructive debate on strategic autonomy is only possible if the parties involved share the same understanding of the phrase. And finally, strategic autonomy is not a goal in itself, nor a simple means to an end; rather, it encompasses both dimensions (ends and means) and requires political choices both in terms of strategic priority-setting and in terms of capacity-building.

A MULTILATERAL ACTOR IN AN EVER MORE MULTIPOLAR WORLD

When considering the external factors driving the current debate on 'strategic autonomy', **the COVID-19 pandemic** certainly appears among the most immediate ones. The pandemic acted as a catalyst in revealing Europe's vulnerability in its reliance on global supply chains for protective equipment and medical supplies³⁴. At the same time, it both accelerated existing geopolitical trends and acted as a potential game-changer in other respects, highlighting in both cases the need to equip Europe with the necessary tools to play an active role in this 'era of re-definition'³⁵.

The pandemic aggravated tensions between the United States and China, as well as between the United States and Europe; it accelerated China's relative growth compared to the rest of the world, despite slowing down its economy; and it gave Beijing the opportunity to exacerbate rifts between EU Member States and exploit them to its advantage,

through its so-called 'mask diplomacy'³⁶. These are all examples of the ways in which **coronavirus played into the dynamics of an increasingly fractured and multipolar international context**. Against this background, Europe's push for greater strategic autonomy must also be read in the light of parallel (if not similar) strategies pursued by other great powers.

The **Trump administration's hostile stance towards Europe and NATO** has often been regarded as the main factor giving 'renewed emphasis to the long-held aspiration for European strategic autonomy'³⁷ in the sphere of security and defence. Indeed, President Trump's unilateralist rhetoric of 'America First' has frequently meant retreat by the United States and the creation of a global leadership vacuum which other powers, such as China, have attempted to fill, for example through its aggressive push to secure critical posts in UN agencies³⁸.

Conversely, President Biden's promise that 'America is back' has been welcomed across the Atlantic, but several commentators have questioned whether a

need to focus on pressing domestic matters (such as healing societal divisions, fighting COVID-19, and shoring up the economy) may hamper his foreign policy ambitions³⁹, especially insofar as domestic issues are the ones most likely to gain him political support⁴⁰. The Democrats' weak hold on the Senate is likely to compound these challenges⁴¹.

In any case, the United States' increasing energy independence (see Figure 1) and the Asian pivot initiated under the Obama administration are signs of **long-term trends shifting US attention away from Europe** and its wider neighbourhood. For many years now, the United States has been actively **trying to reduce its foreign dependencies**, whether through Obama's plans for energy independence⁴², through Trump's attempts at decoupling from China, or through Biden's 'Buy American' plan which, in the words of his National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, should 'help reshore supply chains so that we are never again dependent on China in a crisis'⁴³.

On the other side of the Pacific, Beijing is similarly focusing its economic policy ever more on domestic consumption and import substitution, under the rubric of its **'dual circulation' strategy**. In the face of what its leaders perceive as an ever more complex and uncertain world⁴⁴, China's draft 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) calls for 'properly handling the relationship between openness and independence', **securing China's supply chains and boosting its self-sufficiency** in agriculture, energy, technology and industry.⁴⁵ In a speech to the Chinese Communist Party's Central Financial and Economic Commission in April 2020, President Xi Jinping explained that, 'in order to safeguard the country's industrial and national security, efforts must be made to build independent, controllable, secure and reliable industrial and supply chains, and strive to have an industrial backup system with at least one alternative source for important products and supply channels'⁴⁶.

At the same time, **Beijing aims to ensure that other countries remain dependent on China** for their own supply of key goods⁴⁷. In the same speech, President Xi advocated 'deepening the dependence of international industrial chains on China, in order to develop a powerful deterrent against attempts by

other countries to artificially cut off our supply chains'⁴⁸. In Xi's words, this capability for economic deterrence seems to have a defensive connotation, rooted in an assessment that 'the pandemic may intensify trends against globalisation, as countries become significantly more inward-looking', and it is tempered by calls for international cooperation to build 'an international consensus on norms to safeguard global industrial and supply chains'⁴⁹. Nevertheless, the recent experience of China-Australia relations has clearly shown that Beijing will not hesitate to exploit economic dependencies for offensive purposes as well. China's political intentions underpinning policies such as the Belt and Road Initiative, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), or even the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI), are unmistakable.

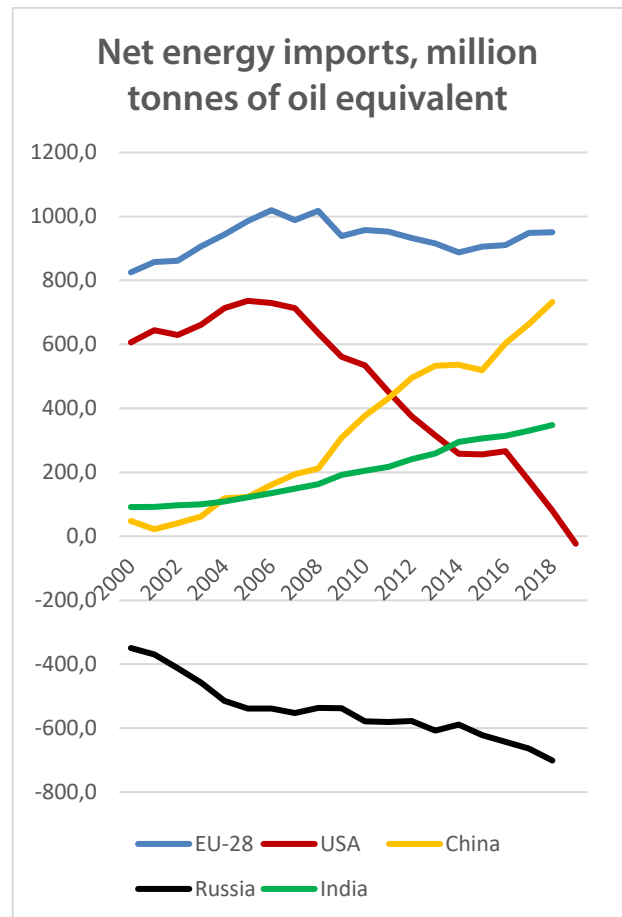


Figure 1: While the EU and (increasingly) China are strongly dependent on external energy sources, the United States became a net energy exporter in 2019 (Data: International Energy Agency).

The United States and China are perhaps the cornerstones of this evolving multipolar order, but they are certainly not the only powers focusing on

shoring up their own capabilities while reducing their external dependencies. **Russia's leadership, for example, has long been aware of the country's dependence on oil and gas exports,** and has been trying to diversify its buyers' market⁵⁰. With the fall in crude oil prices as a result of the pandemic, and the subsequent contraction of Russia's economy⁵¹, Moscow is more keen than ever to 'get off the so-called oil and gas needle', as President Putin said at his year-end press conference in December 2020. At the same time, Russia has been expanding its clout well beyond its immediate 'sphere of influence', for example through increased arms sales and investments in natural resource projects in Africa⁵².

India, on the other hand, launched its own reflection on 'strategic autonomy' already in 2012, when a group of the country's most influential foreign policy specialists published a report entitled 'Nonalignment 2.0'⁵³. Much as in Europe's debate, the authors of that report identified key dependencies to be addressed, key capabilities to be built, and recognised that the essence of 'strategic autonomy', as a reformulation of India's historical policy of Non Alignment, was to ensure that the country 'did not define its national interest or approach to world politics in terms of ideologies and goals that had been set elsewhere'⁵⁴. Unlike their European counterparts, the proponents of India's strategic autonomy did not qualify it directly as 'open', but they also stressed the importance of maintaining an open global order. And, to complete the parallelisms with Europe's debate, they also raised concerns and criticism that India's strategic

autonomy could be seen as an anti-American policy⁵⁵. More recently, India has launched a '**self-reliance' policy** (*Atmanirbhar Bharat*) in May 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, while also reassuring foreign investors that self-reliance is *not* to be mistaken with self-containment or protectionism⁵⁶.

Europe's own push for strategic autonomy does not therefore take place in a vacuum. Parallel 'strategic autonomy' discourses have been gaining ground in other major international players, albeit with their distinctive characteristics. The pandemic has **accelerated a trend of decline in globalisation** which had already been observed for years⁵⁷, but there is a risk that inward-looking policies adopted by major powers in response to this trend may exacerbate it even further, as a **self-fulfilling prophecy**, or as the outcome of a '**prisoner's dilemma**'. Even more, there is a risk that such policies may give rise to a situation of so-called '**security dilemma**', whereby defensive measures taken by one power may be seen as potentially aggressive by other powers, and provoke reactions leading to increased tension and fragmentation of the international system. While the dynamics of the 'security dilemma' refer specifically to the sphere of security and defence, the same could be argued also, for example, in trade and more broadly geo-economic terms.

This context of increasing fragmentation provides an essential backdrop for understanding what 'strategic autonomy' could mean in practice, and the crucial strategic choices facing the EU as a result.

UNDERSTANDING STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

The EU is not the only great power pushing to boost its strategic autonomy by securing global supply chains and reducing external dependencies. Other major international players are pursuing similar policies, partially in reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic. European strategic autonomy must be understood also in relation to those policies.

Firstly, in relation to the United States, a strategically autonomous Europe should develop the means and capabilities (political, institutional, and material) to engage more proactively with Washington (especially in the wake of Biden's election), and to contribute to filling the leadership vacuum left by the US, as its focus shifts more firmly towards domestic matters and the Asia-Pacific region.

Secondly, strategic autonomy cannot be pursued without taking into account other countries' drive to reduce their own strategic dependencies, while leveraging their own dominant positions in the global supply chains.

Finally, the pursuit of self-reliance policies by the world's major powers presents risks of de-globalisation, security dilemmas and prisoner's dilemmas. Against this geopolitical and geoeconomic backdrop, it can be argued that the promotion of European interests and values through strategic autonomy goes hand in hand with Europe's contribution to a functioning multilateral system and to healthy economic interdependence, in the form of resilient and diversified global supply chains. Europe's resilience to external shocks is best served through the construction of a resilient global order.

THE NEED FOR STRATEGIC CHOICES

The foregoing analysis shows 'European strategic autonomy' as a multi-faceted concept, which involves developing capabilities (political, institutional and material⁵⁸), reducing external dependencies, autonomous goal-setting, and an acute awareness of the risks presented by the pursuit of parallel self-reliance strategies by other major global actors. All of these dimensions involve **strategic choices among possible alternatives**, and in this regard a crucial aspect which has been largely overlooked in the debate is **an attention to the costs of strategic autonomy**.

Assuming that, in general terms, the need for greater strategic autonomy (i.e. 'why' should the EU pursue strategic autonomy in the first place) is evident in the light of Europe's international context, then the first choice concerns **'where' specifically it should be focussed**. As discussed, the scope of strategic autonomy has expanded widely from its original focus on security and defence. But pursuing strategic

autonomy in every sector and every policy area would not only be costly and overambitious, it would be an impossible undertaking. There is a clear need to identify **critical dependencies and strategic areas** for the promotion of EU interests and values. This needs to be done *ex ante*, in order to avoid a situation in which whatever happens to be on the political agenda at the time is conveniently presented as 'strategic'. And it needs to be very selective and operational if the EU is to avoid a situation in which everything is considered 'strategic', and therefore nothing really is (as exemplified by the old discussions on 'strategic yogurt'⁵⁹).

The COVID-19 pandemic has also served as a painful reminder that even the most common goods, such as face masks, can become strategic at a time of crisis, when their availability is dependent on a small number of suppliers 'who turn out to be potential strategic rivals'⁶⁰. The identification of strategic dependencies needs to take into account not only the overall dependence on imports for specific goods, but also the diversification of the suppliers,

their ability to cut off supply lines, and the nature of their political relations with the EU. So for example the EU's reliance on the US for the import of non-electric engines and motors is perhaps not as worrying as its dependence on Russia for fossil fuels (due to the different nature of the relationship), which is in turn not as worrying as its dependencies

on China (given that Russia's actual ability to cut off fuel supplies needs to take into account Moscow's own reliance on revenues from hydrocarbons, whereas the diversification of China's economy makes it less dependent on the EU market)⁶¹.

EU import dependences

By major supplier and product group, 2017–2019

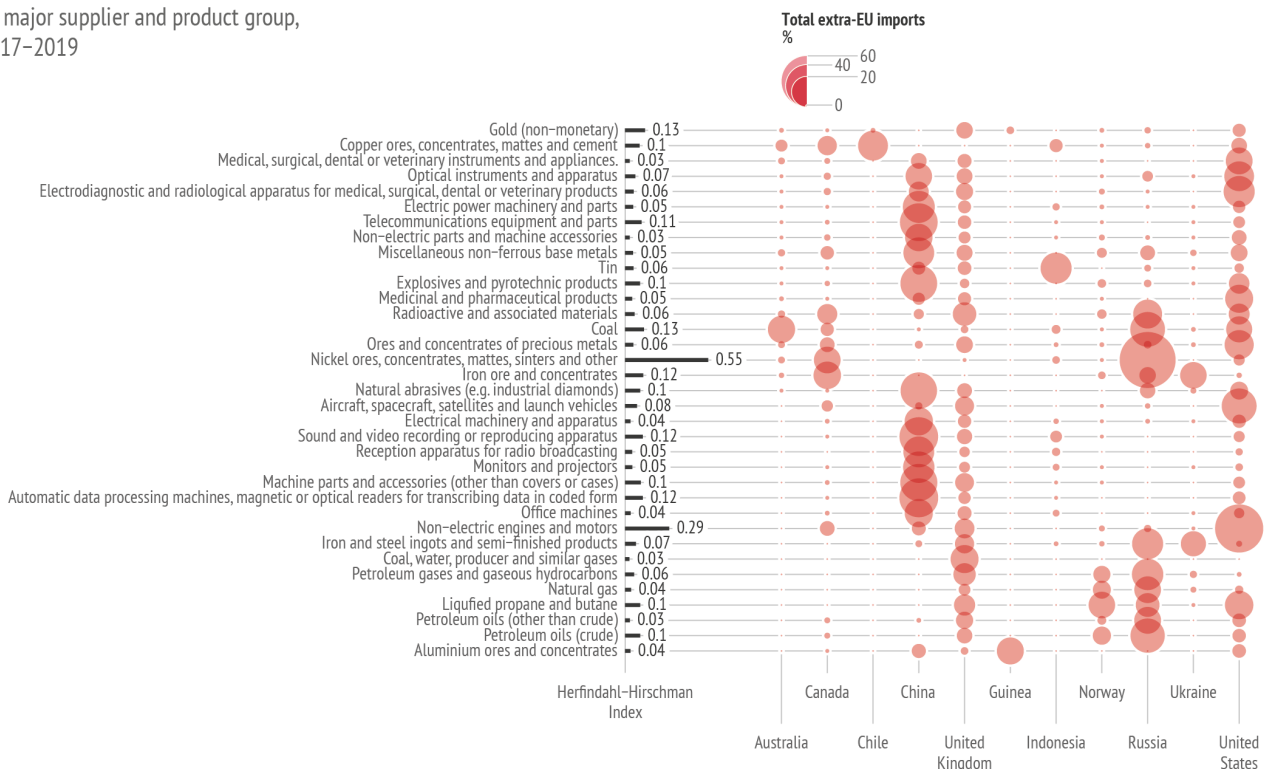


Figure 2: EU import dependencies. The size of the circles represents the rate of dependence on extra-EU imports (as a percentage), for key goods and suppliers. The Herfindahl-Hirschman Index indicates the level of concentration of supply: the higher the value, the greater the EU's reliance on a limited number of non-EU suppliers (Source: EUISS elaboration of Eurostat data⁶²).

A key element to be considered in this first choice is that, arguably, some sectors and policy areas may be more susceptible to exploitation or even 'weaponisation'⁶³ by external rivals. Crucially, as again the pandemic has shown, identifying strategic dependencies relies also on the ability to anticipate future crises, whether they may be due to structural weaknesses⁶⁴, 'black swans' or 'grey rhinos'⁶⁵. This points to the essential **need to develop foresight capacities** at all levels.

The second choice concerns **'how much' strategic autonomy**. As discussed above, strategic autonomy is not a binary concept, but rather a matter of degree, a spectrum of choices ranging from full dependence to full self-sufficiency. It is easy enough to see the benefits of self-sufficiency, but any measures which may be taken in that direction (for example the creation of strategic stockpiles, the diversification of supply chains, or the reshoring of manufacturing capabilities) involve costs, some easily measurable (such as material and financial costs), others more

difficult to quantify (such as political, diplomatic and institutional costs), and the 'optimal' level of strategic autonomy may vary from one area to another. These considerations are hinted at by Grevi, when he writes that 'the extent to which the EU can or should operate autonomously, and through what policies, needs to be calibrated depending on the competences of the EU, the resources available to EU bodies and member states, and the importance of cooperation with partners'⁶⁶. There may also be regulatory limits, some of them possibly even enshrined in the Treaties, on the extent to which the EU and its Member States may steer private markets in the pursuit of these goals.

A third choice is about **'who' should be strategically autonomous, whether the EU or its Member States**. This question has often been overlooked in the debate, with experts referring sometimes vaguely to 'Europe' or 'Europeans'. Can both the EU and its Member States be strategically autonomous? Traditionally, academic debates about the nature of the EU as an autonomous actor have focused not so much on its autonomy from external constraints, but rather on its autonomy in relation to the Member States. France's 2017 Defence and National Security Strategic Review, on the other hand, advocates at the same time French strategic autonomy (whereby 'France must preserve its capability to decide and act alone') and European strategic autonomy (which 'requires the development of a common strategic culture' and is exemplified by the European Intervention Initiative, i.e. a project which is separate from the Union)⁶⁷.

This approach risks glossing over the fact that **European strategic autonomy may sometimes come at the cost of lower national autonomy**, and may require the political willingness to compromise on short-term national preferences in order to build a European consensus. This should be helped by the acknowledgment that, in the long term, no Member State has the critical mass needed to safeguard its own national interests outside the Union. However, long-term considerations may sometimes seem very distant to political leaders facing elections in the short term. And, at a deeper level, it may be difficult to build a unified vision of European strategic autonomy when key strategic

dependencies may vary from one Member State to another (for example, not all Member States are equally dependent on Russian gas, and not all Member States rely equally on China as an export market). Still, the EU has a long history of building consensus among leaders, and the idea of 'strategic autonomy' may well be a factor in helping member states recognise the need for action in strategic cross-sectoral areas, and in encouraging leaders to face the alternative of continuing to depend on unreliable external actors for their countries' essential needs. Strategic autonomy could prove to be a powerful unifying narrative.

In any case, the question of the balance between national and European strategic autonomy does not have a predetermined answer. **Strategic autonomy cannot be simply reduced to a call for further European integration**, not only for obvious considerations of subsidiarity, but also because doing so would inevitably generate resistance from those leaders and segments of civil society who question the idea of 'ever closer Union' as an end in itself. As discussed above, strategic autonomy is not a monolithic concept: it may take different shapes and forms, and reach different levels, depending on the policy area. Whether or not in some areas this may require 'more Europe' is an open question, and a matter of political choice.

All of the above leads to a fourth and most crucial question, which is **'who' should make these choices, and 'how'**. If strategic autonomy is about strategic interests, then the obvious answer is that this task falls to **the European Council**, in view of its responsibility to define the general political directions and priorities of the Union (Article 15 TEU). As for 'how', these choices will only be possible **on the basis of a detailed cost-benefit and cost-effectiveness analysis**, taking into account both measurable and non-measurable costs. The input of other institutions, of course, is essential. The European Commission can provide proposals and further operationalise the high-level choices made by EU leaders; dialogue with the European Parliament will be essential to put in place legislative measures as part of ensuring strategic autonomy, and may also help in better taking into account the views of European civil society; the Council, in its

different formations, can review and take stock regularly of the advancement of the 'strategic autonomy' agenda in each relevant sector. But only the European Council is equipped to make these essentially political choices.

Failure to tackle these questions and make these choices, operationally and at the highest level, would result in the **trivialisation of the concept of 'strategic autonomy'**, which would be reduced to a mere buzzword littering EU political discourse. And as a buzzword, 'strategic autonomy' could be harmful to the European project, in at least three ways.

Firstly, it could easily be hijacked and instrumentalised by both European and external actors: Beijing is already using the phrase to strike pre-emptively at the possibility of a stronger transatlantic alliance which may undermine Chinese

interests⁶⁸. Secondly (and especially if strategic autonomy is made the object of high profile political declarations rather than being mainstreamed pragmatically into EU policies), it could run the risk of 'overpromising', and so exacerbate the gap between expectations and capabilities in EU foreign policy⁶⁹, which would undermine the EU's credibility. Finally, it could result in inaccurate signalling and miscommunication to the EU's allies and partners, which could exacerbate the 'security dilemma' referred to at the end of the previous section. This, insofar as multilateralism can be regarded as an indivisible public good, could harm the EU's prospects of achieving substantial progress in areas such as climate action or the prevention of future pandemics where neither Europe nor any other power can deliver effectively simply by acting 'autonomously'.

STRATEGIC CHOICES: THE ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL

The operationalisation of strategic autonomy requires explicit choices which only the European Council can make, in view of its responsibilities under the Treaties. These choices concern, in particular: (1) identifying critical dependencies and strategic policy areas; (2) setting the 'optimal' level of strategic autonomy in those areas, and identifying the instruments to pursue it; (3) defining the balance between *national* and *European* strategic autonomy in each of those areas.

Strategic foresight can play a crucial role in these choices. Equally, cost-benefit and cost-effectiveness analyses will be necessary, taking into account not only actual costs, but also those of a less quantifiable nature, such as political, institutional and diplomatic costs.

Failing to make these choices would risk trivialising 'strategic autonomy' and reducing it to a mere buzzword. This could be potentially harmful in at least three ways: (1) it could expose 'strategic autonomy' to instrumentalisation; (2) it could lead to 'overpromising', thereby damaging Europe's credibility; (3) it could result in inaccurate signalling and miscommunication to Europe's partners.

References

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