"Strategic Autonomy, Anyone?"

Charting Europe's Shifting Security Debates and 2024-2029 Priorities

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Abbreviations

CARD	Coordinated Annual Review on Defense
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CSDP	Common Security and Defense Policy
EDA	European Defense Agency
EDF	European Defense Fund
EEAS	European External Action Service
EI2	European Intervention Initiative
EUGS	EU Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy
EU-3	France, Germany and Italy
EDTIB	European Defense Technological and Industrial Base
ESS	European Security Strategy
HR/VP	High Representative and Vice President
MPCC	Military Planning and Conduct Capability
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OSA	Open Strategic Autonomy
PeSCo	Permanent Structured Cooperation
SA	Strategic Autonomy
SOTEU	State of the European Union

Executive Summary

- Policymakers are preparing for the 2024-2029 EU legislative period in a dramatically changing geopolitical landscape. With escalating wars and humanitarian crises on its borders, shifting trade dynamics, deindustrialization threats, and a more confrontational U.S. administration, the EU faces pressing challenges that raise fundamental questions about its identity and future. In this context, the debate on Strategic Autonomy is resurfacing as a key issue, with a focus on how EU member-states can unite to address these challenges.

- This Special Paper explores the evolution of the Strategic Autonomy concept—from its early development (2013-2016) and politicization (2017-2019) to its expanded interpretations and shifting engagement (2020-2024). By synthesizing these insights, it identifies key challenges and opportunities for the EU's 2024-2029 legislative period, offering recommendations for policymakers seeking to engage constructively in future Strategic Autonomy discussions.

- Originally an uncontroversial term originating in the post-Cold War drive for greater EU defense capabilities and greater autonomy addressing security hotspots in Europe's near-abroad, Strategic Autonomy has undergone significant change and contestation.

- The early Strategic Autonomy debates, starting in 2013, can be understood as a convergence of several immediate priorities: addressing transnational defense industry needs, easing tensions in transatlantic relations, and presenting a more pragmatic EU-centered foreign policy agenda.

- By the late 2010s, the concept of Strategic Autonomy expanded to encompass not only the pursuit of greater defense capabilities but also,

more actively and controversially, autonomy from external actors. While a lowest-common-denominator approach emerged, and defense initiatives proliferated, the concept was fraught with concerns that it could catalyze other outcomes, such as U.S. disengagement, defense federalism, anti-integration backlash, or an undesirable strategic shift.

- Amid the multi-pronged crises of the early 2020s, the Strategic Autonomy concept evolved. No longer solely focused on developing autonomous capabilities for the distant future, it increasingly emphasized internal resilience and navigating global tensions, such as U.S.-China competition and rising unilateralism. A slogan for a more assertive EU, it quickly expanded into broader policy areas, while its original, more contentious defense policy focus receded.

- In the realm of trade, the Strategic Autonomy concept was repurposed as Open Strategic Autonomy, aiming to balance the EU's competing economies priorities, including industrial policy, free trade, and supply chain security. This broader application of the concept marks a shift for many previously reticent member-states. An increasing number of governments now seek to actively shape Strategic Autonomy discussions to their own preferences, rather than merely resist undesirable developments.

- In defense affairs, the concept has been largely sidelined, especially after the U.S. Biden administration's rise to power. The collective response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has highlighted both successes and limitations of the EU's defense integration, as well as exposed internal divisions. These disagreements underscore the EU's challenges in operationalizing the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). However, proponents and sceptics of Strategic Autonomy increasingly agree that EU defense projects do not inherently undermine NATO.

- Discussions on Strategic Autonomy have regained momentum in 2025, fueled by the second Trump administration's markedly more adversarial approach towards the EU. EU institutions and member-states are once

again compelled to confront these difficult questions, as European voters have grown more supportive of a more autonomous EU in international affairs compared to the previous decade.

- Recognizing the political and institutional constraints of coordinating 27 member-states, this paper offers the following recommendations:

  - ✓ Member-states should reassess whether avoiding the divisive question of autonomy still serves their interests as they transition to the 2024-2029 EU legislative period, particularly given the increasingly antagonistic transatlantic relationship. Without meaningful progress in narrowing the collective divergence in strategic frameworks, claims about the EU's supposed geopolitical nature or emerging assertiveness will ring hollow.

  - ✓ Member-states should continue to prioritize internal coalition-building and strategic deliberation to define clearer visions and redlines, while resisting external efforts to bilateralize or marginalize EU relations. More than capability gaps, it is increasingly political choices—particularly around prioritizing, financing, and activating initiatives—that lie at the center of the EU's core challenges.

  - ✓ Member-states should recognize the complex trade-offs inherent within various Strategic Autonomy agendas, such as the balance between protectionism and trade diversification, industrial policy and fairness, and self-sufficiency versus interdependence. While they are not binary choices, pursuing one often involves compromising the other.

  - ✓ Member-states need to determine an appropriate level of ambition and urgency for EU-linked defense ambitions. If, as in 2020, Europe's security problem and autonomy aspirations are deemed insurmountable without the U.S., this perception could again undermine serious efforts to act, even as the risk of shifting U.S. commitments looms

large. Conversely, downplaying the security problem could hinder the collective resolve needed to break from the status quo, while an approach solely centered on appeasing the Trump administration would yield only fleeting accomplishments.

- After recent years' preoccupation with Europe's internal challenges, EU institutions should scale up their diplomatic and economic engagement with external partners. The EU cannot afford to turn its back on the world, as several strategic agendas can only be achieved in collaboration with others. In this context, the Commission's reported plans to significantly reduce the size of EEAS delegations due to budgetary constraints are particularly concerning.

1. Introduction

"Europe's Strategic Autonomy, anyone?" asked Thierry Breton, the recently resigned French Commissioner for Internal Market, on the morning of November 6, 2024, via the social media platform X. World leaders had already begun congratulating Donald Trump on his election as the 47th U.S. President, with polling data—accurately, as it turned out—indicating that his Republican-turned-MAGA party would control all three branches of government. Despite being a contentious figure in Brussels, where his open disagreements with Commission President Ursula von der Leyen pre-empted his resignation, Breton's rhetorical question underscored something crucial: the EU's "Strategic Autonomy" debates are not settled.

Skeptics and critics may instinctively scoff at the ambitious vision of Strategic Autonomy (SA) advanced by figures like Breton—an approach some have dismissed as outdated, self-serving, or polarizing, especially after war erupted in Europe's east. While discussions on the EU's autonomy were muted in high-level discourse following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, they never truly disappeared. The debates' focus shifted, with new fault lines emerging and the concept of Strategic Autonomy evolving—sometimes significantly. However, the underlying concerns and questions of autonomy remained as relevant as ever.

Following the largest election year in history, marked by escalating wars and dire humanitarian crises in Eastern Europe, West Asia, and Northeast Africa, EU decision-makers are bracing for an increasingly volatile geopolitical future. They face unchartered waters in transatlantic relations, the looming threat of multi-front trade wars, warnings of European deindustrialization, and the uncertain trajectory of the Russia-Ukraine War. At the same time, fierce debates persist within and beyond the EU regarding European values and commitments to the rule of law. Against this backdrop, the underlying

discussions on Strategic Autonomy highlight the enduring challenges at the core of the EU's crises.

Originally an uncontroversial term originating in the post-Cold War drive for greater EU defense capabilities and the ability to independently engage security hotspots in Europe's near-abroad, Strategic Autonomy has undergone significant change and contestation over the past decade. The term was first officially included in Council Conclusions in December 2013, titled "Toward a more competitive and efficient defense and security sector," which sought to shore up the EU's Defense Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB).[1] Since then, it has undergone distinct periods of conceptual evolution.

The concept has evolved through numerous iterations, abbreviations, and contexts over the years—ranging from European Strategic Autonomy (ESA) and Strategic Autonomy (SA) to Open Strategic Autonomy (OSA) and, more recently, Strategic Harmony. With competing member-states and institutions projecting their own hopes, fears, and political agendas onto this contested terminology, it has come to encapsulate a broad spectrum of ideas—from aspirational goals and unfolding processes to hard security concerns, economic strategies, and diverging visions of European identity.

This Special Paper examines the evolution of the Strategic Autonomy concept. It traces its origins and early development from 2013 to 2016, its politicization from 2017 to 2019, and the expanding interpretations and fluctuating engagement from 2020 to 2024. The final chapter synthesizes these insights, identifying key challenges and opportunities to arrive at a set of recommendations for policymakers and officials seeking to constructively approach SA in the coming years.

Special Paper Roadmap

There exists a growing literature on the Strategic Autonomy concept—across academic journals, policy briefings, white papers and political speeches. This literature includes chronological overviews of the concept's evolution in institutional discourse;[2] research on diverging national and subregional

interpretations of its contested meanings;[3] discussions of how to bridge member-state gaps of understanding;[4] SA's functional implications for 'European Sovereignty';[5] and, its application to geopolitical test cases, such as the U.S. withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear deal.[6] At the center of several of these research agendas lie ambitions to delineate the concept, to ascertain its contested meanings, propose pathways forward, and practically try to measure its existence in EU foreign policy.

Despite the significant attention SA has garnered in EU policy debates, systematic analyses of the term itself have lagged policy discourse—particularly as discussions have expanded into broader policy areas beyond security.[7] The research challenge is compounded by the growing and shifting pool of actors contesting SA's meaning, its diverging interpretations, and its inconsistent application across policy domains. Not infrequently, these ambiguities frame SA in binary terms: debating its desirability, questioning whether it meaningfully exists, or challenging the merits of the discussion itself.

This ISDP Special Paper seeks to clarify some of the ambiguity surrounding SA. While it is positioned closer to policy research than theory-driven academia, it draws on insights from Niklas Helwig and Ville Sinkkonen, who argue that embracing the term's ambiguity and its varied meanings allows for deeper exploration of the EU's struggle to manage its external interdependencies and the implications across various policy fields.[8] Rather than attempting to pin down the contested concept's many meanings, the paper traces the conceptual evolution and politicization of SA since its introduction to the EU policy agenda. It examines the key challenges shaping SA's trajectory by exploring: What key factors have propelled or restrained the SA agenda(s)? Why has SA been so divisive and contested at different points, despite a broader common understanding of its basic contours? Finally, what do the answers to these questions reveal about the EU's contemporary moment?

To answer these questions, the analysis focuses on the SA concept itself, tracing its evolution across key actors and time by examining three distinct periods using a comparative case study approach. These fluctuations are

explored through major developments in EU institutions and member-states, particularly those tied to SA and European defense integration. In addition to earlier literature, the study draws on grey literature, including high-level statements and documents from EU institutions and member-states, with particular attention to responses to geopolitical shocks. As the SA concept expands into new policy areas and legal context, the analysis increasingly relies on primary EU sources.

Beginning with the SA's emergence on the EU agenda in 2013, the first section explores its origins in defense affairs, set against the backdrop of Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and NATO defense-burden sharing negotiations. While acknowledging member-states' diverging priorities, this section suggests a nascent shift towards a less idealistic approach to defense and foreign policy issues, driven by practical needs and a move away from past overambition. The second section focuses on the politicization of SA after 2016, highlighting defense integration debates, the Franco-German engine dynamic, and differing views on transatlantic ties. During this period, SA became more contested—in significant part for what it could mean for the European identity and national sovereignty. The third section starts with the new EU Commission's pandemic-shaped agenda, which marks a surge in the use of SA across a variety of policy domains. Divided into two subsections, it traces a conceptual shift from defense to broader notions of resilience against external threats, exploring how crisis management fostered new policy solutions while accentuating member-states' national differences. The concluding section synthesizes these three sections, identifying current tensions and challenges.

Endnotes

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2. Strategic Autonomy Emerges 2013-2016

First briefly acknowledged yet still imprecisely defined by member-states in the 2013 Council Conclusions on priority defense policy areas, SA gradually expanded across various defense-related policy domains, including the European Defense Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB), the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), the European Defense Fund, and, from 2015 and onwards, digital sovereignty and cyber security.[1] This evolving focus on defense issues was driven by the 2014 Russian annexation of Ukrainian Crimea and growing awareness of the European defense sector's austerity-driven erosion since 2008. As debates over defense spending and EU capabilities gained momentum, the EU Commission was actively promoting defense sector integration, with SA emerging as a central concept.[2] Even before the term was adopted by the Council, a 2013 Commission Communication had already stressed the need for a "certain degree of strategic autonomy," emphasizing that "Europe must be able to decide and act without depending" on third-party capabilities, particularly in areas like "security of supply, access to critical technologies, and operational sovereignty."[3]

While earlier scholars attributed the initial defense integration push primarily to political aspiration at the EU level, Karampekios and Oikonomou have pointed to a broader consolidation of European defense manufacturing amid escalating international competition as a central factor. The creation of pan-European defense organizations and the consolidation of supply necessitated "an accompanying merger of demand," with defense industry interests shifting lobbying efforts from the national to the EU level.[4] Accordingly, early discussions on SA reflected a convergence of industrial logics and pre-existing institutional aspirations, intersecting with the emerging security concerns in Europe's East. Despite this, SA remained a bureaucratically driven and politically marginal issue for European identity and member-state national politics. Notably, Commission

President Jean-Claude Juncker never mentioned the term in any of his State of the European Union (SOTEU) addresses, even as he advocated for greater pooling of resources and an end to European "piggyback[ing]" on others.[5]

The SA concept gained greater prominence with the 2016 rollout of the EU Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS)—the first major security strategy document in 13 years. The EUGS defined SA as autonomy of "decision and action" with the necessary tools to act without overt reliance on others—a prerequisite for fostering peace within and outside of EU borders.[6] Building on the long-standing EU "actorness" debates—discussions about the EU's role as a geopolitical actor with capabilities commensurate with its economic power—this emerging understanding framed SA as the capacity to act "autonomously when and where necessary and with partners wherever possible".[7]

SA did not signify a new approach to EU-centered capability pooling as much as it provided a new label for long-standing aspirations in Brussels, wherein the CSDP necessitated that member-states "acquire and sustain those capabilities which underpin their ability to act autonomously."[8] Drafted in consultation with member-states and the wider foreign policy community,[9] the HR/VP-led strategy framed a stronger and more strategically autonomous defense sector as complementary and synergetic with NATO, and essential for the sake of a "healthy transatlantic partnership with the United States".[10] Part of a longer post-Cold War trend—precipitated by concerns over U.S. commitments to European security—this framing gained renewed salience after the U.S.' self-proclaimed "pivot to Asia".[11]

The transatlantic framing of stronger EU defense capabilities was reflected within NATO. The first EU-NATO Joint Declaration in 2016 stressed the need to develop "coherent, complementary and interoperable defence capabilities of EU Member States and NATO Allies," adding that a "stronger NATO and a stronger EU" were mutually reinforcing.[12] This approach was also reflected in scaled-up cooperation, with regular mutual briefings and high-level dialogues beginning in 2017. Additionally, it reflected efforts to coordinate and create synergies between member-states' defense sectors, to

hypothetically optimize the cost-effectiveness of otherwise fragmented defense spending.[13] The Commission estimated the ensuing annual cost inefficiencies to be between €25 and €100 billion.[14]

Despite consolidation among European arms manufacturers in the preceding decade, the 28 EU member-states still employed a total of 178 different major weapon systems in 2016, compared to 30 in the U.S.[15] Streamlining defense procurement processes thus became a priority to reduce inefficiencies and alleviate the long-standing issue of unbalanced defense cost burden-sharing—a source of tension famously highlighted by outgoing U.S. President Barack Obama, who criticized NATO's European "free riders".[16] When presenting the European Defense Action Plan proposal, President Juncker stressed that "[if] Europe does not take care of its own security, nobody else will do it for us," effectively linking SA with the need for a strong defense industrial base.[17]

Crafted in a more precarious geopolitical environment, while drawing on past failures, EUGS was more modest than its predecessor. While the 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS) was praised as a "clear and accessible" document, it had been criticized as weak on "guiding policies in practice," which hampered Brussels' ability to translate goals into action.[18] The ESS' aspiration to create "flexible, mobile forces" capable of acting "before countries around [the EU] deteriorate" had repeatedly failed to materialize, with the EU's Battlegroups never seeing deployment.[19] In the wake of the Libyan and Syrian Civil Wars, the 2015 refugee crisis, and the Russian annexation of Crimea, the underwhelming Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) coordination efforts became undeniably evident.

In the context of defense industrial policy and fostering peace in the near neighborhood, the EUGS therefore sought to nurture "the ambition of strategic autonomy," albeit with defense issues acknowledged as member-state prerogatives.[20] It remained a loosely defined ambition for the future, meant to "encourage defense cooperation" and "principled pragmatism," thereby avoiding some of the overambition which characterized earlier initiatives.[21] Yet, within a year of finalizing the EUGS, the Commission presented proposals for Permanent

Structured Cooperation (PeSCo), Coordinated Annual Review on Defense (CARD), the European Defense Fund (EDF), and the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC). The MPCC, however, was notably restricted to coordinating non-executive military missions in an advisory capacity to avoid a British veto over sovereignty and NATO non-duplication concerns.[22]

This latent tension over the EU's defense integration—particularly the degree of separation from NATO and the U.S.—had not yet fully emerged but would later become a central issue in the developing SA debates, echoing tensions of earlier decades. While the Obama administration expressed cautious support, it should be remembered that the U.S. approach varied significantly across administrations, ranging from tacit approval to ambivalence, and at times, outright skepticism and hostility. The Clinton and Obama administrations, while largely ambivalent, accepted EU defense initiatives under the framework of Madeline Albright's Three D's (no duplication, no decoupling, and no discrimination).[23] By comparison, the Bush administrations were more openly critical of early EU-centered defense efforts, particularly during the explosive disagreements over the illegal invasion of Iraq.[24] This historical ambiguity, in which the Europe has been seen as a space to be simultaneously "protected, controlled, and empowered," has had lasting impacts on strategic thinking in EU capitals.[25]

During this early period, SA can be understood as a convergence of several immediate political priorities for the Commission and member-states. It aimed to address pressing transnational defense industry needs, ease tensions in transatlantic relations, and present a more pragmatic foreign policy agenda. The focus on developing military capabilities and addressing defense sector shortcomings was propelled by economic logic and security needs. However, SA did not yet significantly engage with deeper questions regarding the EU's identity or long-term trajectory. By emphasizing autonomous EU capabilities as complementary to NATO, while acknowledging that defense affairs remain a member-state prerogative, the Commission sought to advance defense integration efforts without provoking contentious debates that might fundamentally challenge the status quo.

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3. Strategic Autonomy Politicized 2017-2019

What had originated as a conceptual vehicle for achieving autonomous military capabilities was broadened in the following years, becoming intertwined with notions of European identity and Brussels' place in a changing world. Particularly marked by Brexit and Trumpism, the aftermath of the EU's *annus horribilis* of 2016 inaugurated more contentious elements for SA, triggering debates regarding populist anti-EU backlash and the EU's dependency on the United States. Where Brexit had shown that the Union could be dismantled from within, unchartered waters in transatlantic relations showed how Europe's security architecture could be fundamentally disrupted by external forces beyond its control.

Though President Donald Trump's policy inclinations were foreshadowed on the campaign trail, few EU leaders were prepared for the sweeping shift in Washington—characterized by a stark aversion to multilateralism, abandonment of treaties, escalating trade conflicts, and scattershot use of extraterritorial sanctions. While European countries had experienced periods of significant friction with the U.S. before, the extent to which President Trump painted the entire EU as an outright 'foe' was unprecedented.[1] Although he later walked back comments suggesting NATO was "obsolete," his 2017 refusal to affirm NATO's Article 5 mutual defense clause, and intimations that countries failing to reach NATO's 2 percent defense spending might not be protected induced great unease.[2]

Trump's ascent to office invigorated pre-existing U.S. debates on EU defense capabilities, which largely coalesced into four camps: the 'doubters,' wary of the impacts on NATO; the 'disbelievers,' who viewed the CDSP as a paper tiger; the 'devotees,' who believed that stronger EU defense could reinforce the transatlantic bond; and, the 'decouplers', who saw little inherent value in

keeping U.S. forces in Europe. In his transactional approach and threat to "go it alone" unless allies paid more, Trump aligned more closely with the latter group.[3]

In this uncertain outlook, SA gradually emerged as a symbol—not only for the pursuit of greater European defense capabilities as a means of gaining the freedom to act, but also of the more active, and often controversial, pursuit of autonomy as freedom from others.[4] This impulse was shaped both by perceived U.S. unreliability and the need to overcome EU disunity. Yet, while some were eager to advance efforts towards independent defense capabilities to pre-empt U.S. disengagement, others sought to slow the pace, fearing such steps could also lower the bar for a final break in transatlantic ties. SA was thus intertwined with broader, reactive debates—within and between member-states—on how to best reinvigorate EU unity in the face of a deteriorating external environment.

Among those most vocally advocating a more autonomous EU was French President Emmanuel Macron, whose legislative agenda was closely intertwined with EU politics. In his 2017 keynote Sorbonne speech, Macron stressed that the great challenges of the day could only be solved with the "re-foundation of a sovereign, united and democratic Europe," one with the capacity for autonomous military action, albeit "complementary to NATO".[5] This idea was later echoed by German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, and Commission President Juncker, who mentioned "European sovereignty" in his 2018 State of the Union address. [6] Over time, however, Macron's rhetoric increasingly stressed autonomy in ways which fueled anxieties of some member-states. For instance, in 2018, he called for a "true European army" with a collective EU defense plan. Though he expressly argued for the initiative to not replace NATO—an "important and strategic alliance"—the initiative carried concerning supranational undertones for integration-averse member-states.[7] These diverging perceptions were exacerbated by occasional mistranslations, which once caused a spat with the Trump administration by inaccurately suggesting that Macron's envisioned army was desired for protection from the U.S.[8]

Macron's pro-EU agenda mirrored changing sentiments in Germany, where Chancellor Angela Merkel remarked, "The times in which we could completely depend on others are, to a certain extent, over […] We Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands".[9] Merkel had cautiously supported Macron's calls to consider an EU army and described his European Intervention Initiative (EI2) as a "good complement to NATO".[10] Reaffirmed with the 2018 Meseberg Declaration, the EU's so-called Franco-German engine—representing roughly half of EU defense spending post-Brexit—thus moved in lockstep to strengthen European capabilities. However, this alignment was not without limits, as German policymakers were more wary of anti-integration backlash. No longer able to shield latent opposition behind British vetoes, and facing growing pressure from Euroskeptic electorates, reluctant member-states could feel compelled to take more openly critical positions when EU cohesion was already tenuous.[11] Additionally, there were concerns that France's multi-track integration preferences could create an undesirable in- and outgroup dynamic within the EU.[12]

Amid these diverging perceptions of what SA would entail—particularly in terms of transatlantic relations, supranationalism, and integration dynamics—the increasingly politicized concept was met with a mix of support, ambivalence, and outright contestation from surveyed policymakers. While most member-states (17)—including the EU-3—considered SA important or somewhat important to their foreign and defense policies by 2019, it was deemed "not really important" by five member-states—Estonia, Latvia, Luxembourg, Ireland, and Hungary—and contested by the remaining five, including Sweden, Denmark, Poland, the Netherlands, and the UK. These hesitations were underpinned by a variety of factors, including concerns over U.S. decoupling, neutrality, anti-CSDP integration,[13] and indirect pressures from wary voting publics. The aftermath of the Eurozone crisis had exacerbated the EU's structural imbalances, leading to increasingly diverging public experiences of the EU and a proliferation of heterogenous Eurosceptic agendas.[14]

Despite the discernible differences between the emerging narrow and expansive interpretations of SA, and the cacophony of national views, the extent of

disagreement over its core meaning has often been overstated. As Elina Libek noted in 2019 following extensive interviews with foreign policy officials from several member-states, there was, at its most basic level, a common understanding of what SA entailed. However, surrounding this conceptual core was a shell of disagreement on "how to get there, why and what comes with it." The "diverging views on strategic autonomy [were] not about the abstract term itself but the consequences of its potential application."[15]

These diverging views fueled tensions over how to constructively engage the U.S. on security. This was particularly evident after Macron's 2019 comments, in which he suggested that America was showing signs of "turning its back on" Europe and that NATO was experiencing "brain death." While these remarks were labeled inflammatory by several allies, they hinted at the reality that the Alliance was struggling to make progress on strategic issues, reflected in the Trump administration's unilateral withdrawal from Northern Syria, and Türkiye blocking NATO's Eastern flank defense plan.[16]

Yet more inflammatory were Macron's proposals to reorient NATO towards fighting counterterrorism and pursue rapprochement with Russia. The latter was particularly poorly received in Eastern Europe, highlighting the diverging strategic cultures within the EU—what is often referred to as the EU's Strategic Cacophony Problem.[17] The episode reinforced existing hesitations among Atlanticist member-states about France's leadership ambitions in a more EU-centered security architecture. These concerns were accentuated by France's regionally pre-eminent military capabilities, its Southward-oriented defense priorities, and its historically Gaullist security policy tradition. These anxieties were projected onto the SA concept, which, before its 2013 elevation to EU-level discourse, had first emerged in French security doctrine and the 1998 British-French St. Malo declaration.[18]

Another area of friction concerned the degree of inclusivity in the new defense proposals set out in the EUGS and subsequently adopted in 2017.[19] For example, France had envisioned PeSCo as a small-scale defense platform that swiftly could take operational decisions without the slow decision-making

processes associated with EU-wide consensus. Yet, on German insistence, it came to include all CSDP-participating states, thus relegated to capability development and acquisitions. It was against this backdrop that Macron in 2018 spearheaded the more exclusive European Intervention Initiative (EI2), which, although seeking synergies with PeSCo, was set up outside of its structures for quicker decision-making and to allow external participation.[20] Notably, France declined to invite Poland, fearing that a pro-U.S. Warsaw could erode the initiative from within.[21] While the initiative was meant to facilitate a European "common strategic culture" and align with NATO, it heightened pre-existing concerns over duplication and fragmentation of institutional efforts among Atlanticist states.[22]

The same tensions were evident within wider defense integration efforts concerning third-party inclusion, especially after the 2017 establishment of the €13 billion European Defense Fund. Germany, France, Italy, and Spain favored an EU-exclusive approach to ensure the development of truly autonomous capabilities, with outsider participation as the exception. In contrast, Atlanticist member-states advocated for an open-door policy to facilitate greater pooling of resources and military interoperability. The Trump administration strongly protested this exclusivity, arguing that it excluded U.S. manufacturers at the cost of quality and interoperability.[23] However, HR/VP Federica Mogherini countered that the EU defense market was significantly more open to U.S. exports than vice versa, pointing out the absence of a European equivalent to the U.S. "Buy American Act." [24] It took a year before the Council set out conditions "exceptionally" permitting third-party PeSCo participation, requiring "substantial added value" and no ensuing external dependencies.[25]

Aside from diverging strategic cultures and sentiments towards the U.S., the EU also faced internal divisions over its approach to China. In 2018-2019, the Trump administration bilaterally lobbied individual member-states for the exclusion of Chinese telecom vendors from European 5G networks on national security grounds. Member-states, however, were sharply divided on the merits of aligning with U.S. trade restrictions, driven by fears of potential

trade retaliations and differing economic priorities. Pew Research polling showed that since the early 2010s, major EU economies such as France, Germany, Poland, and Spain had consistently ranked China above the U.S. as the world's leading economy. However, this average contrasted sharply with perspectives in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, where the U.S. was considered the dominant economic power and viewed more favorably overall.[26] This divide played a role in making consensus positions more elusive.

Before 2019, SA was predominantly framed in terms of autonomy within Europe's near neighborhood or in relation to the U.S. However, the U.S.-China trade war and ensuing pressures on member-states to pick sides brought China much closer in Brussels' strategic thinking than ever before. This underscored the need for a more unified European position, sparking deliberations on whether to align or resist taking sides in the growing tensions. The discussions crystalized in the 2019 EU-China Strategy, which introduced the "partner, competitor, and systemic rival" framework and called for a "whole-of-EU" approach to China. The same year, European NATO members subsequently agreed to recognize China as an important topic at the London Summit. [27]

This marked a turning point in discussions on SA, which were increasingly framed around navigating the complexities of U.S.-China competition.[28] As part of a broader shift in security thinking, the growing focus on trade and technology further signaled a move beyond the hard security-centric conception of SA towards an emphasis on broader technological and supply chain security. In 2019, the Commission cited cybersecurity in 5G networks as "key for ensuring the strategic autonomy of the Union".[29] Anticipating this conceptual expansion, outgoing HR/VP Mogherini described SA as "something that goes beyond military action," including the ability to "shape the rules of the international economic system" […], having an independent and principled trade policy [… and], raising international standards…"[30]

Notwithstanding diverging national positions on SA, de facto defense cooperation continued, with regular consultations between CARD and NATO's defense planning process. The 2018 EU-NATO summit reaffirmed

NATO's "unique and essential role as the cornerstone of collective defence".[31] In 2019, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg commended the EDF for addressing defense industry fragmentation,[32] while European Defence Agency Chief Executive Jorge Domecq argued SA should be viewed "as a positive endeavour, not something directed against NATO, the [U.S.] or anybody else."[33]

This section has illustrated the rising politicization and contestation of SA as a conduit for competing visions of how the EU should navigate contemporary challenges—and increasingly—broader economic priorities. These tensions encompass transatlantic issues, the Strategic Cacophony problem, rising Euroscepticism, and Sino-European relations. Throughout this period, a lowest-common-denominator view of SA emerged—a stronger EU with complementarity to NATO. However, debates on SA became increasingly central to the gridlocks surrounding EU integration, even as defense initiatives were deployed at an unprecedented pace. These debates were ladened with fears that SA could pre-empt something else—such as U.S. disengagement, defense federalism, anti-integration backlash, or an undesirable strategic redirection. Even as EU leaders and institutions increasingly acknowledged that the integration project could not simply grind to a halt amid both endogenous and exogenous shocks, it became increasingly challenging to envision what should replace it.

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4. The Open Strategic Autonomy Era 2020-2024

In a new decade initially marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and the European energy crisis, SA was shaped under continuous pressure, with each new crisis underscoring the need for greater pan-European coordination. Mere months into the new Commission's term, member-states were forced to confront the escalating COVID-19 pandemic. Legislative files were fast-tracked at unprecedented speeds through the invocation of Article 122 TFEU, which allows for the bypassing of the European Parliament if a member-state is seriously threatened by severe difficulties caused by "natural disasters or exceptional occurrences beyond its control." [1]

The aftershocks of the Sovereign Debt Crisis had already led many member-states to begrudgingly acknowledge that joint inaction or procyclical economic policy risked inflicting irreparable harm on their own economies and long-term stability, and by extension, threatened the EU's foundations. The Commission was thus allowed to expedite proposals on issues ranging from vaccine purchases, pandemic unemployment benefits, and energy levies to renewables permits. In this context, SA gained traction as a catchphrase in the Commission for a more ambitious EU agenda.

While unmentioned in the Commission's early political program[2] and Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen's annual State of the European Union (SOTEU) addresses, SA gained a more prominent position in institutional discourse with the creation of the EU COVID-19 Recovery Plan. Von der Leyen explicitly linked the Recovery Plan's second pillar to ensuring "future resilience and strategic autonomy",[3] while Council President Charles Michel similarly lauded SA as "goal No. 1 for our generation" and a "new common project for this century".[4] HR/VP Josep Borrell linked SA with the pandemic, describing it as "the Great Accelerator of world history,"

which had exposed and worsened existing threats and vulnerabilities, thereby increasing Europe's "appetite to think and act much more autonomously".[5]

In high-profile speeches and documents, SA was increasingly reframed by EU institutions as a symbol for boosting resilience against external threats while addressing excessive dependencies in areas such as vaccines, trade, energy, and technology. The multipronged crises triggered by the pandemic, and later the invasion of Ukraine, pressured member-states into accepting intergovernmental bargains that, under normal circumstances, would have been politically unfeasible. Key taboos broken included the suspension of fiscal and state aid rules, joint debt reissuance, and centralized crisis management. These emergency compromises—while imperfect and contentious—created opportunities to strengthen the competencies of the Commission,[6] which advanced many of its initiatives under the loosely defined SA banner.

The sense of urgency was reinforced in high-level discourse. HR/VP Borrell asserted that the EU needed to relearn the language of power to "avoid being the losers in today's US-China competition."[7] A joint communication with the Commission underscored the need to defend rules-based multilateralism and international law in a "more unpredictable and unequal world" where relations "between major powers are increasingly confrontational and unilateralist." Accordingly, the EU was to contribute to harnessing globalization by "acting multilaterally whenever it can and being ready to act autonomously if it must […]."[8] In his inaugural article on SA, Borrell stressed that the world was becoming "transactional," warning that SA was a "process of political survival, if we do not act together, we will become irrelevant."[9]

These statements posited SA both as a goal and as a defensive mechanism to navigate external pressures in a changing world where the EU's relative influence was shrinking. Far from the rosy predictions of a "European century" in the 2000s, SA was framed as a symbol of resilience—a process of adaptation and survival rather than a distant, hard-security centered ambition for the future.[10] By linking SA to the broader notion of resilience, it assumed a more immediate and multifaceted significance, extending well beyond its

traditional hard-security connotations. At the same time, the SA discussions' "highly polemical" nature and lack of progress in arriving at a single consensus definition was recognized, with Borrell noting at a Foreign Affairs Council press conference that the term since 2016 had been used "almost everywhere" and reached "almost everything."[11]

As Borell had emphasized, "the stakes of strategic autonomy [were] not limited to security and defence [but] apply to a wide range of issues including trade, finance and investments."[12] Broadened and diluted in scope, SA became a term that could be invoked in discussions ranging from financial market regulations and digitalization to supply chain oversight, the green transition, and trade and competition policy. No longer confined to building up capabilities necessary for autonomous action on the global stage, SA increasingly encompassed internal resilience from threats both external and internal. This shift was particularly palpable in trade and competition policy—policy domains where the EU Commission also holds exclusive competences.

4.1 Strategic Autonomy in Trade and Industrial Policy

Building on earlier debates about the fragmented state of Europe's defense sector, the logic of SA spilled over into broader trade and economics discussions. This was exemplified by the diverging reactions to the Commission's prohibition of the 2019 Siemens-Alstom merger, which showcased mounting tensions between industrial strategy and competition policy.[13] While assertions of the EU's relative decline are sometimes exaggerated—the EU has converged upwards with the U.S. in per capita PPP terms and labor productivity since 2005—[14]the EU hosts far fewer giants in critical growth industries than the U.S. or China. This growing disparity increasingly sparked discussions on how to enhance the EU's industrial capacity and economic competitiveness, a cornerstone for any pretense to SA.

Similar to the calls for strengthening the EU's defense industry, leaders of industrial heavy-weights advocated for shoring up the EU's broader technological-economic base. For instance, outgoing Chancellor Merkel

supported a modernization of the EU's competition rulebook.[15] This push faced swift resistance from EU free traders and smaller member-states, wary of uneven benefits from interventionist economic policies. Concerns particularly reflected the keen awareness that most of the EU's largest companies had their home domicile in either France or Germany,[16] which together would account for 77 percent of the EU's state subsidies in 2022.[17] A coalition of 15 member-states warned that strengthening the EU's economic base must ensure uniform enforcement of Single Market legislation. Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, Estonia, and Finland later opposed the extension of relaxed emergency state aid rules.[18]

The EU's attempts to balance these conflicting goals were codified during the 2020 Trade Policy Review, in which outgoing Trade Commissioner Phil Hogan linked SA to trade policy.[19] At the time, Executive Vice-President Margrethe Vestager stressed that autonomy means to have "choices as to what kind of society one wants to shape, and Europe has been able to make choices because of its prosperity, which in turn comes from openness".[20] When approving the new policy, the Council outlined "strategic autonomy while preserving an open economy" as a key EU objective.[21] Unveiled in February 2021, the Policy Review inaugurated the modified concept Open Strategic Autonomy (OSA), which encompass resilience and competitiveness, sustainability and fairness, and assertiveness and rules-based cooperation, encapsulating "the EU's ability to make its own choices and shape the world around it […]".[22] The European Central Bank has described the OSA agenda as an "emerging set of regulatory, structural and fiscal policies seeking to address the EU's economic vulnerabilities arising from geopolitical factors," even as it remains ambiguous exactly where "Open" begins and ends.[23]

SA was thus rebranded to signify the broader ambition of striking a balance, allowing the Union to reap "the benefits of international opportunities, while assertively defending its [economic] interests […]".[24] This aspiration has taken its expression in new trade and investment policies, such as the Anti-Coercion Instrument, the EU Economic Security Strategy, the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, and the Competitiveness Compass. The

weaponization of energy supplies by Russia, economic coercion and strategic investments by China, and tariffs, record-subsidy packages, and extraterritorial sanctions by the U.S., each showcased how member-states could be divided and strong-armed by external powers.

These developments provided impetus for the Commission's push for greater oversight and regulatory coordination, while also helping to shape how European identity was reflected against an unpredictable outside world. Notably, the percentage of Europeans identifying as EU citizens increased from 64 percent to a record-high 74 percent between 2015 and 2024, with support for a common foreign policy at the highest levels since 2007.[25] Moreover, this trend coexisted with a still-robust spectrum of Eurosceptic sentiments, even as Brexit may have diminished the appeal of hard Euroscepticism.[26] Eurosceptic parties across several member-states—including France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Sweden—have moved away from past pledges to seek an outright exit from the EU, in favor of instead pursuing reform from within.

This change has been particularly evident within the OSA concept, with a growing number of member-states—skeptics included—moving from merely resisting undesirable developments to proactively shaping SA to their own preferences.[27] In 2021, the Netherlands collaborated with Spain to outline a vision for a SA that emphasizes openness and avoids protectionist impulses.[28] Two years later, five member-states—Belgium, Finland, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Slovakia—published a joint position paper, advocating for the explicit inclusion of OSA in the "portfolio of an executive vice president" in the next EU Commission.[29] Spain, during its 2023 Council Presidency, continued this momentum by developing a non-paper proposal to strengthen the EU's OSA.[30] Meanwhile, Sweden stressed for the first time in its 2021 EU policy declaration that "strategic autonomy must be protected without the EU turning inwards."[31] However, the 2022 shift in government saw SA again disappear from official documents.

These branding efforts have also gained traction among more prominent skeptics. Hungary, which previously had been ambivalent about SA, used

its "Make Europe Great Again"-branded 2024 Presidency to propose its own spin on the concept, emphasizing food sovereignty as a "part of the Strategic Autonomy of the EU."[32] Prime Minister Viktor Orbán stressed the EU "should not copy the foreign policy of the American Democrats but should have its own European approach in the spirit of strategic autonomy […]."[33] Meanwhile, Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski, ahead of the Polish 2025 Council Presidency, expressed his preference for not framing the discussion as "strategic autonomy," but rather as the "strategic harmony" of the EU, NATO, and the U.S.[34]

Even as different actors project different meanings onto SA, these instances of active member-state coalition building and ongoing contestation suggest broader discussions are likely to persist, even if conceptually diluted. Aside from the 2023 Swedish Council Presidency, every Presidency agenda has mentioned SA in some form during 2021-2024. While von der Leyen has avoided the contentious term in her high-profile SOTEU addresses and declined calls for a dedicated OSA Commissioner portfolio, a 2023 Commission report on its past work and achievements made several references to the need to strengthen strategic autonomy across multiple policy areas.[35] The term was also invoked over 20 times in the Commission's Horizon Europe strategic plan 2025-2027 for research and innovation funding.[36] Additionally, Charles Michel's successor as Council President, former Portuguese Prime Minister António Costa, is a known OSA proponent, further underscoring the institutional continuity into the 2024-2029 legislative period.

4.2 Strategic Autonomy in Defense and Foreign Policy

While SA was broadened to encompass more policy areas, it was rhetorically de-emphasized in its original, by comparison, more controversial context—defense policy—even as security cooperation deepened. In late 2020, member-states agreed on clarified criteria for third-party participation in PeSCo, enabling the U.S., UK, and Denmark to participate in EDA procurement projects. EU-NATO cooperation also intensified during the pandemic, with weekly coordination calls on crisis management,

disinformation practices, strategic communications, and member-states' armed forces contributions.[37]

However, the 2019 NATO summit's aftermath left the EU's long-term security relationship with the U.S. a more divisive—and therefore avoided—issue. This tension was underscored by an intervention from German Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer shortly before the U.S. elections, which stressed that "illusions of European strategic autonomy needed to come to an end: Europeans will not be able to replace America's crucial role as a security provider."[38] SA in defense affairs took a back seat as EU leaders focused on assessing whether they would face four more years with the Trump administration or a more agreeable counterpart.

The new Biden administration's declaration that "America is back" initially cooled pressures for a more autonomous Europe.[39] Yet, in signaling a return to normalcy after four years of supposed anomaly, Biden inadvertently encouraged EU leaders to lower their collective ambitions, even as several key aspects of Trump's foreign policy remained intact. Despite hopes that standing disputes would be addressed, and relations improved with a proliferation of summits, protectionist tariffs on European steel remained, diverging views on regulations and the WTO endured, and Washington continued to take unilateral decisions without consultation. After the disorganized 2021 U.S. pullout of Afghanistan, Charles Michel stressed the episode had reaffirmed the need for "strengthening European Strategic Autonomy".[40] Though not absolving EU leaders' of agency, Biden's considerable foreign policy continuity with Trump—dubbed "a more polite America First" by Martin and Sinkkonen—was not particularly "conducive to the development of […] strategic autonomy."[41]

After eight consecutive years of growth in defense spending (2014-2022), the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian War has highlighted both successes and deficiencies of collective action. The EU has operationalized the European Peace Facility (EPF) to support Ukraine, adopted 16 sanctions packages against Russia, and supported Ukraine's EU membership aspirations. Member-states have moved closer to the 2 percent defense spending target,

with the EU average meeting the 20 percent target for investments to total spending since 2019. However, member-states have not met the 20 percent target for collaborative research and technology, nor the 35-percent target for collaborative equipment procurement. Collaborative defense procurement spending has stagnated as a proportion of total defense spending. As the EDA previously warned, "spending for collaborative projects does not seem to be a priority for the majority" of member-states. [42] The EDA's 2021-2022 report even left collaborative defense spending unreported due to limited data, with only nine member-states providing proper statistics.[43]

The war both reinforced and suppressed SA-linked discussions in defense affairs. For France and like-minded member-states, the war signified a vindication of the long-standing insistence that the EU should not be too reliant on others for defense. Conversely, for many Eastern European capitals, the war reinforced the view of Russia as the EU's central security threat, and of larger EU member-states as unreliable compared to the U.S. Despite a German 'Zeitenwende'—a change of era—pledge on defense spending and President Macron's framing of the war as a strategic "electroshock" reawakening NATO trust gaps remain. Meanwhile, member-states' inability to fulfill ammunition production pledges for Ukraine has renewed the old in/exclusivity tension within the SA agenda. Some seek to pragmatically procure from outside the EU, while others protest that it undermines the long-term efforts to strengthen autonomous European defense manufacturing through demand consolidation.[44] There are also disputes over diverging accounting methodologies for reimbursing member-state contributions.[45]

These disputes reflect deeper procedural challenges in operationalizing the Common Foreign and Security Policy without a treaty change. They have been notably evident in Hungary's recurrent vetoes of near-consensus positions on Ukraine. But divisions have only intensified with the failure to agree on a unified and principled position on the parallel Israel-Gaza War, with member-states on opposing sides.[46] The EU's marked inability to apply leverage has continued even after UN warnings of ethnic cleansing, the issuance of International Criminal Court arrest warrants,[47] and a growing

body of legal experts and human rights organizations finding the methods of warfare consistent with genocide.[48]

Amid these heightened differences and gridlocks, member-states have continued to sidestep sensitive questions about the ultimate goals for SA. It was not included at all in the March 2022 Versailles Declaration, which instead focused on pledges to strengthen defense capabilities, building European sovereignty, and reducing dependencies.[49] The term appeared only once in the EU's long-awaited Strategic Compass, a 2022 document that outlined central defense and security goals. Despite the document's focus on defense integration and prioritizing the threat from Russia, it reaffirmed NATO as the bedrock of transatlantic security. While the Compass maintained a degree of constructive ambiguity—avoiding clear answers on sensitive issues concerning the CSDP—it took a notable step in acknowledging concrete EU interests, vowing to enhance "the EU's strategic autonomy and its ability to work with partners to safeguard its values and interests. [50] Still, two years later, the 2024 proposal for a European Defense Industry Programme (EDIP) completely avoids mentioning SA.[51]

While some speculated in the wake of the war that any pretense to SA in defense affairs was over, it has continued to flare up in discussions.[52] In April 2023, following a trip to China, President Macron faced notable backlash for saying that the EU should not be a "vassal" of the U.S. and get caught up in crises "that are not ours," including a crisis in the Taiwan Strait, as it could prevent the EU "from building its strategic autonomy."[53] The comments were especially criticized by Poland, which accused him of undermining U.S. security commitments. Yet, Council President Michel suggested there had been a "leap forward on strategic autonomy," even as other leaders might not "say things the same way that" Macron did. Michel argued many had warmed to the SA agenda, including on the U.S. alliance, which do not entail "blindly, systematically follow[ing] the [U.S.] on all issues."[54]

Such sentiments gained renewed momentum in early 2024 following former President Donald Trump's recollection of telling an EU leader he would

encourage Russia "to do whatever the hell they want," unless the 2 percent defense spending target was achieved.[55] Whether accurate, this mirrored a similar retelling by Commissioner Thierry Breton, who claimed Trump had told von der Leyen that "if Europe is under attack [the U.S.] will never come to help you".[56] Council President Michel said the episode re-emphasized the EU's need "to urgently further develop its strategic autonomy [and] keep our [NATO] Alliance strong".[57] Trump's comments highlighted the reality that only 18 out of 31 NATO members were on track to meet the 2 percent target in 2024—a symbolical year, given the 2014 Wales summit pledge to reach the target with a decade.[58]

These recurring tensions have also influenced public opinion on transatlantic cooperation and the EU's degree of ambition in defense affairs. Polling by the Bertelsmann Foundation across seven major member-states revealed a shift: while 63 percent of respondents still saw NATO as a cornerstone of their security, the percentage of Europeans who would like the EU to "go its own way"—as opposed to collaborating with the U.S.—in international affairs had increased dramatically from 25 to 63 percent between late 2017 and 2024.[59] Similarly, a poll conducted by the European Council of Foreign Relations across nine EU countries in November-December 2024 found that just one in five Europeans viewed the U.S. as an ally who "shares our interests and values," while 51 percent considered the U.S. a necessary partner.[60] Meanwhile, the 2024 Eurobarometer showed majority support in every EU member-state for the Common Defense and Security Policy, with 71 percent of EU citizens agreeing that the EU should reinforce its capacity to produce military equipment.[61]

Donald Trump's 2024 election win has further reignited the more contentious discussions on SA that were sidelined in 2020. In his first post-election TV interview, Trump reiterated he would absolutely consider leaving NATO unless "they're paying their bills," while Vice-President Elect JD Vance separately suggested support could be conditionalized if the EU tries to regulate American social media platforms.[62] Although U.S. law prohibits the President from unilaterally withdrawing, this does not preclude disengagement

from NATO's North Atlantic Council or the passive withholding of military support. Concurrently, Trump's pledge to take German jobs and make the EU "pay a big price" with sweeping tariffs threatens to strain the EU's already tight budget.[63] The ECB's Financial Stability Review has warned of the risk for a new sovereign debt crisis.[64]

The growing friction and uncertainty in 2024 have prompted new initiatives at both the EU and national levels. Senior EU diplomats have implied Commission contingency plans for a potential trade war, pledging to hit back fast and hard if Trump comes through on his campaign trail pledges.[65] President von der Leyen, re-appointed for a second term, has established a dedicated defense portfolio within the Commission, gaining notable support from Poland and the Baltic States.[66] In November 2024, the Commission approved for the first time funding from the joint EU budget for five cross-border defense procurement projects, subsequently floating plans for triggering an emergency clause in the Stability and Growth Pact to exempt defense spending from budgetary rules.[67]

President Macron reaffirmed his vision for greater Strategic Autonomy and self-reliance in in his April 2024 Europe Speech—a thematic successor to his 2017 Sorbonne address. He warned "the days of Europe . . . relying on the US for security are over," stressing the need to further develop a "European pillar within NATO" and to support joint investments with common EU borrowing.[68] This has been coupled with reconciliation efforts in Eastern Europe, following his 2023 acknowledgment of insufficient responsiveness to Central and Eastern Europe: "We lost an opportunity to listen to you".[69] In turn, Polish Prime Minister and former Council President, Donald Tusk, has stressed growing Franco-Polish alignment on EU issues and Ukraine, outlining joint defense financing as a priority for the Polish EU Council Presidency.[70] Concerned that an adverse peace deal might be negotiated between Russia and the U.S without Ukraine's input, Tusk pledged to revitalize the Weimar Triangle with France and Germany.[71]

These nascent deliberations pointed to a gradual departure from past gridlock. Outgoing HR/VP Borell considered the shift in defense discussions one of the most positive developments since 2019. He described the end of what he viewed as a largely misguided debate—between those favoring greater strategic autonomy and those who feared that any European defense initiative would inevitably weaken NATO—as a significant achievement. In the wake of the U.S. elections and the aggression against Ukraine, an overall consensus emerged on the need to strengthen NATO "by building a solid 'European pillar' within it."[72] While there are both narrow and broad interpretations of the "European pillar" concept, positions increasingly seem to align in such a way that EU-led defense initiatives are no longer viewed as antithetical to NATO.[73]

Despite the efforts by EU leaders to present a unified front, the early reactions to the new Trump administration have been distinctly reactive and defensive. While some had dismissed Trump's tendency to make bold campaign pledges as mere negotiation tactics, hoping that cabinet appointees would exert a moderating influence, the rapid roll-out of unprecedented, adversarial policy shifts suggests otherwise. As one anonymous EU Commission official put it: "We prepared for different scenarios. We did not expect all of the most negative scenarios to hit us all at once."[74]

Notable examples include: Trump's refusal to rule out the forceful annexation of allied territory;[75] his comments that the EU was "formed to screw" the U.S. on the same day that Secretary of State Marco Rubio snubbed visiting HR/VP Kaja Kallas;[76] Vice President Vance's confrontational MSC speech on EU politics;[77] proposals for a U.S. takeover and ethnic cleansing of Gaza;[78] and, most concretely for Brussels, the unilateral decision to reengage Russia and concede ground immediately, without Ukraine's presence or prior consultation with EU leaders. During his first visit to Europe, U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth ruled out NATO or U.S. involvement in a post-war Ukraine, called for security guarantees to be provided by "European and non-European troops," and warned against assuming "America's presence will last forever."[79]

These antagonistic developments are fundamentally reshaping the discussions on European-centered defense—not only by eroding U.S. security guarantees but also by drastically shifting the scope and timeline of change. Unlike in 2017-2019, the recognition that drastic changes are required now extends beyond the traditional supporters of SA in defense affairs. Remarkably, following his victory in the February 2025 elections, life-long Atlanticist Friedrich Merz of Germany's CDU declared strengthening Europe's defense as quickly as possible his "absolute priority […] so that, step by step, we can really achieve independence from the USA."[80] Meanwhile, Poland and Denmark welcomed President Macron's reiterated proposal to discuss extending the French nuclear deterrent to the entire EU.[81] Nevertheless, the initial absence of EU-centered summits has been striking, with select EU leaders gathering for emergency mini-laterals to coordinate veto-proof responses, even as an overly member-state-driven, ad hoc approach risks falling prey to bilateral divide-and-rule tactics.

Whether SA overtly returns to defense discourse, and regardless of the contents of NATO's envisioned "European pillar," EU capitals face the challenge of determining an appropriate level of ambition and urgency. If, as in 2020, Europe's security problem and autonomy aspirations are deemed insurmountable without the U.S., this perception could again undermine serious efforts to act, even as the risk of shifting U.S. commitments looms large. Conversely, downplaying the security challenge may still hinder the collective resolve and sacrifice needed to break from the status quo. Meanwhile, an approach wholly centered on appeasing Trump—through increased defense spending but reinforced, cost-inefficient dependence on U.S. arms—would amount to little more than a fleeting accomplishment, one increasingly out of touch with public sentiments.

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5. Conclusion

The logic of SA has continuously changed over time, with member-states projecting competing priorities and visions onto the concept. Unlike two decades ago, when the ESS envisioned a stronger, more proactive EU in global affairs, SA has increasingly come to be defined by its supporters as something necessary to keep the Union together, overcoming its internal contradictions and defending vaguely defined notions of European sovereignty and resilience in the process. Meanwhile, even its primary skeptics increasingly engage in implicit branding efforts to sculpt it in their favor. It is in this context that SA has evolved, even as there remain highly diverging views on its many meanings.

SA first emerged as a conceptual vehicle within the EU bureaucracy for defense sector integration, responding to concrete pressures for demand consolidation within a fragmented yet increasingly transnational European defense industry. It sought to address specific defense spending inefficiencies, shore up transatlantic ties, and—following its inclusion in the EUGS—signified a less idealistic approach to scaling up the EU's CSDP ambitions. However, amid Brexit, Trumpism and elevated Euroscepticism, the ensuing defense projects were hampered by fears of anti-integration backlash, with growing concerns over what SA could morph into.

Responding to an uncertain geopolitical outlook, SA became gradually intertwined with wider notions of European identity. It emerged as a proxy for the diverging views on what the EU project should become, what kinds of autonomy it should pursue, and its relationship with major powers. Tensions arose between Atlanticist- and integration-averse member-states, and the more permissive stances in Western and Southern Europe, especially in dealing with the U.S. and Russia. The tensions highlighted Europe's Strategic Cacophony, where competing strategic cultures shaped the EU's approach. Despite these

challenges, defense integration initiatives continued, with deepening EU-NATO cooperation.

By the early 2020s, major external events reshaped the debates over SA, extending beyond defense industry integration to new policy domains. Geopolitical factors, like the U.S.-China Trade War, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, emphasized the limitations of nation-states in managing transnational challenges alone. Despite robust Euroscepticism, the uninterrupted crises highlighted the necessity of regional coordination to resist external threats. The securitization of supply chains also broadened the scope of security discourse, facilitating new intergovernmental bargains and advancing ad-hoc integration measures. Moreover, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine revealed the gaps in previous prior defense efforts, setting the stage for future disputes while driving gradual convergence on European defense initiatives. Yet, as of early 2025, it remains uncertain how these converging positions will withstand the unprecedented and transformative policy shifts of the second Trump administration.

Initially framed as an outward-looking concept, SA has increasingly focused on managing internal vulnerabilities and dependencies that could be externally instrumentalized against EU member-states. This shift has encouraged policies aimed at reducing critical dependencies through back- or friend-shoring and diversifying suppliers. However, its expansion into trade policy has introduced new tensions for balancing national security and economic openness. These dynamics, shown in the contested "Open Strategic Autonomy" agenda, reflect a broader trend towards more EU coordination, shaped by changing public views of what the EU should be and do. While it remains unspecified precisely what the EU seeks autonomy from, SA has increasingly been invoked as an ongoing process for long-term survival, resilience, and geopolitical relevance, transcending its aspirational origins.

The analysis points to persistent and deepening contradictions within the EU's CFSP. The absence of a coherent foreign policy framework continues to plague its efforts, with single member-states blocking EU-wide consensus.

This has been compounded by the cacophony of views on the parallel war in West Asia. As lamented by Borrell and echoed by new EU Council President António Costa, the all-pervasive double standards charge, regarding violations of International Humanitarian Law by Russia in Ukraine and Israel in Gaza, exposes profound divisions that undermine the EU's credibility as a union of shared universal values committed to international law.[1] Such divisions go beyond free-riding tendencies and narcissisms of difference; they severely corrode the EU's soft-power globally and exacerbate internal rifts making it harder to operationalize the policy tools created in recent years.[2]

Finally, with a finite strategic bandwidth, EU capitals will increasingly have to face the need to reconcile conflicting goals within the various SA-related agendas. For example, efforts to ensure EU economic resilience by raising environmental and labor standards may clash with broader trade diversification strategies. Conversely, an insular EU that neglects climate change commitments and international governance reform risks alienating key prospective partners essential for realizing Strategic Autonomy.[3] Whether framed as Strategic Autonomy, Open Strategic Autonomy, or Strategic Harmony, the concept's future will depend on the EU's ability navigate these contradictions.

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6. Five Recommendations

Recognizing the political and institutional constraints of coordinating 27 member-states, this paper offers the following recommendations:

- Member-states should reassess whether avoiding the divisive question of autonomy still serves their interests as they transition to the 2024-2029 EU legislative period, particularly given the increasingly antagonistic transatlantic relationship. Without meaningful progress in narrowing the collective divergence in strategic frameworks, claims about the EU's supposed geopolitical nature or emerging assertiveness will ring hollow.

- Member-states should continue to prioritize internal coalition-building and strategic deliberation to define clearer visions and redlines, while resisting external efforts to bilateralize or marginalize EU relations. More than capability gaps, it is increasingly political choices—particularly around prioritizing, financing, and activating initiatives—that lie at the center of the EU's core challenges.

- Member-states should recognize the complex trade-offs inherent within various SA agendas, such as the balance between protectionism and trade diversification, industrial policy and fairness, and self-sufficiency versus interdependence. While they are not binary choices, pursuing one often involves compromising the other.

- Member-states need to determine an appropriate level of ambition and urgency for EU-linked defense ambitions. If, as in 2020, Europe's security problem and autonomy aspirations are deemed insurmountable without the U.S., this perception could again undermine serious efforts to act, even as the risk of shifting U.S. commitments looms large. Conversely, downplaying the security problem could hinder the collective resolve

needed to break from the status quo, while an approach solely centered on appeasing the Trump administration would yield only fleeting accomplishments.

- After recent years' preoccupation with Europe's internal challenges, EU institutions should scale up their diplomatic and economic engagement with external partners. The EU cannot afford to turn its back on the world, as several strategic agendas can only be achieved in collaboration with others. In this context, the Commission's reported plans to significantly reduce the size of EEAS delegations due to budgetary constraints are particularly concerning.[1]

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