Standing alone: EU faces obstacles on path to strategic autonomy

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United States disengagement and a range of external threats are raising the need for Europe to embrace strategic autonomy, but politics will make the necessary industrial and defence reforms tricky. *Brooks Tigner* reports

Strategic autonomy for Europe has been an unfaltering mantra within the European Union since June 2016 when it unveiled its 50-page Global Strategy. Among other goals, it insisted member states need "full-spectrum land, air, space, and maritime capabilities, including strategic enablers" to keep Europe safe and to respond to external crises.

Developments since then have only added to the concept's urgency: the election of a US president openly antithetical to the EU, Russia's continued physical and virtual sabre-rattling around the continent's edges, fear of uncontrolled migration from across the Mediterranean, and worries of climate change anarchy.

Italian Navy destroyer Durand De La Penne as part of EUNAVFOR MED 'Operation Sophia' to address people smuggling in the Mediterranean Sea on 1 October 2015. Fear of uncontrolled migration from Africa and the Middle East is among the reasons European defence integration is being pursued. (Alberto Pizzoli/AFP/Getty Images)

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While the Global Strategy largely focused on how to boost the EU's common security and defence policy for external application – such as protecting Europe's perimeter, near-abroad crisis response, and missions in Africa – EU officials now talk of the need for a far more ambitious approach.

"Strategic autonomy was originally coined only for defence, but such a narrow definition would detract from the concrete tasks we now face," Helga Schmid, outgoing secretary general of the European External Action Service (EEAS), the EU's foreign policy unit, told a closed conference of EU and national officials, policy specialists, and reporters on 11 July.

"There is a clear consensus emerging that the EU has to become more assertive – more aggressive if you will – in its external positions," said Schmid, "but this should not be an ideological confrontation. Being more autonomous does not mean decoupling from the US, which is our strategic partner. Yet we need to take action when things threaten to undermine our interests."

For Schmid and most other speakers at the conference, strategic autonomy now implies knitting together Europe's military, economic, technological, diplomatic, export, and industrial policies as a last-ditch effort to shore up the EU's position in the world. At its base it is driven by Europe's growing fear of atavistic great power restraints imposed by China and the United States.

"These restraints are hampering us more and more as we look to the future," said Mark Leonard, director of the European Council on Foreign Relations, a think tank that co-hosted the conference. "For example, what would happen if the US decided to restrict European investment in China the way it has done in Russia or Iran? The cost of Europe's non-sovereignty is very concrete."

Ann Mettler, head of the European Political Strategy Centre, a research unit that reports to the European Commission, agreed. "We know what a world dominated by US is but we don't know what that will be under China," she told the conference.

However, is it realistic for EU members to aim for strategic autonomy, and can they align their policies for the greater good and take strategic decisions quickly when needed? There is no shortage of scepticism.

'Drowning the fish'

Europe's policymakers risk "drowning the fish", or confusing things, by extending the debate on strategic autonomy to everything and nothing, according to Sven Biscop, senior researcher at Belgium's Egmont Institute, a think tank. "One should not confuse autonomy – the capacity to act on one's decisions – with sovereignty, which is the ability to take one's own decisions in the first place. Both are crucial but they are not the same," he said.

Defence is the starting point for any lunge in the direction of true strategic autonomy and that presupposes two things, said Jorge Domecq, chief executive of the European Defence Agency, which co-ordinates defence integration within the EU.

The first thing is that member states "have at their disposal the full spectrum of military assets that taken together could enable the EU to take military action – and on its own, if necessary", Domecq told *Jane's* . "Second [is] that the functionality and usability of these assets are not restricted by any technological or political caveats controlled by non-European actors. Today, admittedly, this is not the case."

However, an array of obstacles lies behind both suppositions.

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