



A Crash Test: EU Strategic Autonomy in the Foreign Policy of France

Łukasz Maślanka

France uses the idea of EU strategic autonomy as a tool in its own foreign policy. France's aim is to redefine the Union's partnership with the U.S. and NATO. Hence, the activity of President Emmanuel Macron in emphasising the differences between the positions of the U.S. and the EU, especially in relations with China and Russia. Macron's rhetoric worries other European countries and hides the real problems in EU security policy, such as insufficient financing of the Common Security and Defence Policy as well as the lack of a clear definition of strategic autonomy.

EU strategic autonomy, defined as the ability to respond independently to crises and threats, appeared in the conclusions of the European Council in December 2013, followed by the EU Global Strategy of 2016. Since the beginning of Macron's presidency, France has used the concept to loosen transatlantic cooperation and promote the idea of the EU as a superpower in its own right. Misunderstandings between the U.S. and the EU during Donald Trump's presidency fostered the French aspirations. The change of American president did not induce the French authorities to give up the idea of strategic autonomy, but forced them to look for new arguments to bolster it.

French Autonomy. "Europe as a Power" is one of the three priorities of the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union (CEU) scheduled for the first half of 2022. Macron insists that integration efforts should focus on the transfer by the Member States of some competences to give the Union greater possibilities of exerting external influence, for example, by ending the requirement of unanimity in foreign policy. An area that would still require unanimity would be the admission of new members to the EU, which France regards for now as contrary to the goal of strengthening the EU.

The economy is to be the main area of building European power. The French authorities understand this to mean the expansion of the EU's protectionist tools. They consider planned [EU taxes](#) and trade agreements, such as the

[investment agreement with China \(CAI\)](#), concluded despite U.S. concerns, as elements of the Union's impact on the global framework. At the same time, France does not hesitate to block agreements that threaten its economy (for example, [the deal with Mercosur](#)). France also supports EU digital independence (such as a "European cloud", the production of semiconductors, and regulation of the digital market).

The French authorities emphasise the need to consolidate European industry so that EU companies can more effectively compete with American and Asian giants (the idea of "European champions"). In particular, the goal seems to be maintaining the rentability of the [French arms industry](#), which France seeks to be the basis of EU defence autonomy. This issue has arisen when negotiating burden-sharing with allies, such as the Future Air Combat System (FCAS) in which France's reluctance to share technologies with Germany and Spain led to conflicts. France also criticises what it sees as the excessive dependence of its European partners on U.S. weapons.

In promoting strategic autonomy, France also defines the priorities of its defence doctrine, emphasising its dissatisfaction with the present shape of NATO, which remains [an alliance of collective defence](#) against the threat from Russia. France views this NATO profile as increasing Russia's aggressiveness and making it difficult for France to focus the attention of European partners on areas important to its interests, such as the Mediterranean, the

Sahel, and the Middle East. Therefore, an important role in French policy is played by the [European Intervention Initiative \(E2I\)](#), implemented outside the EU but with its allies. The E2I, along with the idea of a European Security Council, reveals that the UK remains—[despite Brexit](#)—a key military partner of France.

Acceleration. The French government fears that a return to transatlantic cooperation may diminish interest in strategic autonomy in the EU. Macron is trying to convince the U.S. authorities that leaving Europeans to be independent in shaping their strategic environment will give the Americans the opportunity to focus on [the Indo-Pacific](#). At the same time, France suggests that the appropriate field of [cooperation with the U.S.](#) should be global challenges, such as environmental protection, UN reform, and humanitarian crises.

Another factor encouraging France to intensively promote its vision of strategic autonomy is the situation in Germany. The government's approach to [transatlantic cooperation](#) and autonomy may change significantly depending on the outcome of [the autumn Bundestag elections](#). Macron has decided to take advantage of the lack of a unified position on strategic autonomy in the current German government to set the tone for the discussion. To this end, he engaged in a polemic with Germany's defence minister, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, who, in reaction to the election of Joe Biden, strongly advocated rebuilding close political and defence cooperation with the U.S.

France has also recently sent out contradictory signals regarding Nord Stream 2 (NS2). Construction of the gas pipeline was criticised on 1 February by the French EU Secretary of State Clément Beaune. The message seems to have been addressed to the U.S. authorities and implied that NS2 is an investment carried out by Germany against the will of other EU countries. A few days later, however, Macron stated that France was in solidarity with Germany on NS2 while hinting that strategic autonomy was a way to bypass U.S. extraterritorial sanctions, and thus gain some independence.

France will continue to promote strategic autonomy within the EU itself. During its presidency of the CEU, France wants to lead it to adopt the "Strategic Compass", a document that will set the EU's military ambitions and define a common view on threats and challenges around the Union. France, together with Cyprus, Greece, Spain, and Italy, will seek to focus the EU's attention on its southern neighbourhood and the Mediterranean Sea. Another chance to redefine transatlantic cooperation would be—as postulated by France—EU recognition of the threat posed by the U.S.-China rivalry, without the explicit support of the Americans.

Conclusions and Prospects. For France, the discussion alone of strategic autonomy, understood as loosening transatlantic ties and minimising the role of NATO, is a tool to promote its own foreign policy goals. France will have no problems finding partners in the EU who are reluctant to hinder relations with Russia and eager to strive to focus the Union's attention on its southern neighbourhood. However, unlike France, countries such as Greece, Spain, Germany, and Italy declare a firm attachment to NATO and the alliance with the U.S.

Further proof of France's commitment to building EU autonomy would be greater readiness to share its technologies (especially in defence) with its partners and to consult key strategic decisions. The disputes with Germany over the transfer of military technologies or [France's confrontational attitude towards Turkey](#) indicate that there is no agreement on the goals of strategic autonomy, even among the EU countries potentially favourable to it.

The French authorities acknowledge the destabilisation risk of [Russia](#) and [China](#). However, they try to avoid explicitly defining it among the threats to the EU, which the French perceive would indicate the need for close cooperation with the U.S. against those two countries. They see that as just a new confrontation of military-ideological blocs, detrimental to the vision of multipolar management of global affairs promoted by France. Rather than a threat, Russia appears to be France's partner in these ambitions.

For Poland, the weakness of the French vision of strategic autonomy is its underestimation of the importance of collective defence—guaranteed by NATO—for the security of Europe. The work on the EU Strategic Compass may be an opportunity for Poland to emphasise the importance of collective defence. The division of tasks between the EU and NATO in the area of security is also of key importance. In Poland's view, the EU's priority should be to create infrastructure facilitating the mobility of allied troops, for which now there are insufficient funds.

Poland supports most of the actions taken by the EU to protect the interests of European companies and consumers, but unlike France, Poland considers it crucial to maintain the freedoms of the internal market and to promote cooperation with those EU partners who share its values. Hence, the need to maintain close economic and political ties with the United Kingdom, adopt the trade agreement with Mercosur, and return to negotiations on a comprehensive agreement with the U.S. Support for EU businesses should not be a pretext for Member States to avoid the consequences of these firms' arbitrary actions, such as the construction of the NS2 gas pipeline. The discussion taking place in the EU and supported by France about how to evade the U.S. extraterritorial sanctions is in Poland's view missing the point of the risk of the project to the Union's security.