

# THE MANY DIMENSIONS OF THE EU STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

**Assoc. Prof. Dr. Georgiana Ciceo, PhD**

*Faculty of European Studies/Babeş-Bolyai University*

## *Abstract:*

*In a speech to a distinguished audience at the Bruegel's Think Tank last autumn, President Charles Michel of the European Council chose to address a principle that has been in one way or another at the heart of the EU Common Security and Defence Policy since its inception, but which was explicitly mentioned only in the EU Global Strategy developed by his predecessor Federica Mogherini in 2016. Back then, the principle of strategic autonomy was seen as an essential prerequisite for the promotion of European principles and values, peace, and security across European borders. Until now, it has been considered that since Europe is already one of the world's leading strategic powers, from this position the EU will have to pursue three objectives: stability, the ability to set standards, and the advancement of its own values (Charles Michel). The aim of this contribution is to assess the concept of strategic autonomy of the European Union based on the „capability-expectation gap“ hypothesis, as defined by Christopher Hill in 1993, to describe the imbalance between the growing expectations for a stronger EU political role on the international stage and the limited opportunities available to the EU to meet those expectations.*

**Keywords:** strategic autonomy, EU global strategy, common foreign and security policy

The calls for an even stronger commitment in world affairs from its side have fuelled Europe's inner quest on how it can add strength to its soft power profile as an undeniable proof of its prominence on the international stage. Reverberating Hedley Bull's appeal (Bull, 1982), Professor Christopher Hill from the London School of Economics argued in the immediate aftermath of the launching of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) in an article that has remained a reference in the literature, that in order to achieve international actorness the Union has to develop its capacity to defend itself and

project a military power (Hill, 1993, p. 318; Cameron, 1999, p. 11). Hill's analysis went on that in order to have effective military actions, the European Union has to strengthen its defence capabilities which in his view meant the strengthening of the mutual obligations of the Member States, the enhancing of the operational capacities and the mobilization of the necessary resources (Hill, 1993, pp. 319-321). Although he proceeded from the reality of a manifest lagging behind the EU's Common Defence Policy, in his contribution he touched upon the need for a political and constitutional support for redressing the obvious imbalances. The analytical framework advanced by him for evaluating Europe's capacity to assert itself as a reliable partner on the international stage centred around the „capability-expectations gap“. As already mentioned, this has quickly become part of the foreign policy analytical toolbox because of its power to tackle one of the biggest challenges of European foreign policy: meeting demands with positive outcomes, and preserved its explanatory power despite the many attempts aimed at refining it (Holland, 1995; Hill, 1998; Ginsberg, 1999; Bretherton and Vogler, 1999).

Building on the three above-mentioned variables identified by Hill as essential for evaluating the EU capacity to defend itself, we intend to evaluate EU's ambitions of strategic autonomy. In doing so we intend to organise this paper in three sections. Firstly, we will explore the three variables with the aim to determine and expose their various facets. Then, based on these findings we will attempt to adjust them in order to make them fit for the proposed research on EU strategic autonomy. In the final part, we will assess the EU's capacity for strategic autonomy using these three variables and based on how France and Germany relate to this issue. Throughout the analysis we will rely on official documents relevant to the topic under discussion.

### **The three dimensions of the capabilities-expectations gap**

In a world of „complex interdependence“ it is obvious that the capability side needs to be carefully considered, especially if we take into considerations the current expectations from the EU. By the time Hill wrote his seminal article, these expectations were related directly to the ambition to maintain the stability of Western Europe, to contribute to the better management of the world trade, to become a voice of the developed world in relation to the South, and to provide a second Western voice in international diplomacy (Hill, 1993, pp. 310-312). In a larger sense, the expectations from the EU concerned mainly around assuming an international role as a regional pacifier, responsibilities in international crisis management, and duties as mediator in world in international conflicts, as well as offering a bridge between rich and poor, and, finally, building better coordination mechanisms for the world economy (Hill, 1993, pp. 312-315).

Many of these considerations on which Hill built his arguments on the role of the EU on the international stage preserve, as we will show in the next

section, their relevance. Moreover, the discussion on the strategic autonomy of the European Union, it can be passed very easily through the filter of those considerations, especially if we take into account the three prerequisites identified by him as necessary to close the gap with the capabilities. *Mutual obligations* were regarded as an important requirement to express solidarity in the face of any military or security threats coming from the outside environment. As such they did not need to be in conflict with other obligations such as those arisen within the framework of NATO (Ojanen, 2006) or OSCE (Moser, 2015), but they had to offer the Union the ability to act independently in case any of these alternative forms of cooperation would have fallen apart. Under the *operational capacities* it was understood an ever-deeper coordination and institutionalization of the cooperation among the military command centres of the Member States so that they will be prepared for the further elaboration of the Union's operations in the field of security and defence. As far as the *resources* were concerned, it was considered that they will have to cover both the operational and the administrative costs necessary for enabling European Union to act convincingly on the world stage. In the centre it is placed the budget and its capacity to bear the necessary costs. Looking at the multilayered nature of the European decision making, the wide variety of actors involved as well as the multitude of instruments that might be employed, then it is obvious that the success of the European Union in tackling worldwide problems depends largely on the fruitful interaction between the Member States and the EU institutions.

Furthermore, this essay will try to evaluate based on the criteria mentioned above how strengthening the EU capabilities will make it fit for achieving goals and projecting power on the world stage. In other words, we will attempt to assess the EU capacity to achieve a level of strategic autonomy proceeding from the way the EU sees its role on the international stage and how it aims reconcile its institutional constraints with the political ambitions to create a favourable environment for strategic action. Against this background, the following section aims to examine how, in the view of European leaders, the EU's international position could be strengthened by increasing its capacity for strategic autonomy.

## **Dimensions of the capabilities-expectations gap in the EU ambition on strategic autonomy**

According to the EU's Global Strategy, the principle of strategic autonomy has been seen as an essential prerequisite for the promotion of European principles and values, peace, and security across European borders (European External Action Service, 2016). Strategic autonomy was set as the „ambition of the Global Strategy“ (p. 7), „necessary to promote the common interests of EU citizens, as well as EU principles and values“ (p. 7), and „important for Europe's ability to promote peace and security within and beyond its borders“ (p. 12, 22). With direct reference to the strategic autonomy, it was also

mentioned that it needs a „sustainable, innovative and competitive European defence industry“ (p. 48). Three years later, the review of the Global Strategy made reference to the EU’s strategic autonomy again in connection to the Union’s security and defence by outlining the areas in which it will need to further expand and/or consolidate – intelligence support to decision-making, building a common strategic culture, enhancing interoperability, improving the command and control, deepening defence cooperation to retain and develop Member States’ single set forces, building a Defence and Technological Industrial Base, offering an improved normative framework for the development of new technologies, ensuring coordinated response to cyber threats, interconnecting the areas of capabilities, effectiveness and the joined-up approach, securing access to routes and networks (European External Action Service, 2019, pp. 12-14).

These general ideas on the strategic autonomy of the European Union were to be complemented by a Roadmap that would consider different public policy options. Unfortunately, Federica Mogherini failed during her term to advance in the direction of generating a Roadmap. Nevertheless, her ideas were brought forward by Charles Michel in his capacity of president of the European Council. He acknowledged Mogherini’s contribution to the discussion, although her „strategic leadership in this area has not yet been fully appreciated.“ According to Charles Michel, Europe is already one of the world’s „leading strategic powers“, and from this position the EU will have to pursue three objectives: stability, the ability to set standards, and the advancement of its own values (Michel, 2020). As far as the *stability* is concerned, this is supposed to refer first and foremost to physical security, but is also bound to take into consideration environmental security (air quality, access to drinking water, protection of biodiversity, respect for the planet and for the human species), economic and social security, a favourable environment for investment and trade, both within the EU market and with the rest of the world, and upholding fair market conditions and reciprocity with EU trading partners, free and open economies, while opposing protectionism, securing the EU’s supply of critical resources (medical products, rare earth elements) and digital sovereignty. With regard to *safeguarding EU capacity to set standards*, this was seen as a key factor contributing to Europe’s current power and being the leader in different fields. It is meant to cover a wide array of topics from the use of chemical substances that ensure that toys produced around the world are safe to General Data Protection Regulation that sets the global standard for the protection of privacy online or climate change. Finally, *promoting EU values* was viewed as a necessary element for heightening the Union’s legitimacy and attractivity in the eyes of its partners around the world.

As such, the idea of strategic autonomy has expanded gradually from the area of security and defence to cover a wider array of matters. Charles Michel’s speech highlighted a considerable broadening of the meaning given to the concept of strategic autonomy from its original meaning. His speech is indicative of a wider range of expectations regarding the EU’s involvement in inter-

national affairs. Under these circumstances, the next section of this contribution will attempt to assess EU capacity to bridge the gaps that separate it from its stated goal of achieving strategic autonomy. The analysis will seek to identify the solutions envisaged by the Franco-German couple to strengthen the European Union's strategic autonomy, by considering the three elements considered by Hill as essential to bridge the gap between expectations and capabilities.

## **Agendas for closing the gap on EU strategic autonomy in France and Germany**

Without directly contradicting the French idea of European strategic autonomy, Germany believes that this should refer to Europe's ability to „actively shape“ its own neighbourhood and the world order. This means that it cannot be limited strictly to security and defence issues, but must be understood in a much broader sense of a politically coordinated approach not only to foreign policy, but to all areas of public policy that bear an external dimension (trade, development policy, environment, etc.). What is essential to note in this context is that the German idea of strategic autonomy is more nuanced than France's, as it appeared in the heated exchange between the French President and the German Defence Minister in November 2020. While agreeing that Europe needs a „well-coordinated foreign, security and defence, trade and development policy“ if it is to „play a bigger role in world politics,“ according to the German defence minister, any discussion on this topic must start from accepting the reality of Europe's dependence on the United States in terms of defence – 75% of capabilities, 70% of strategic enablers (reconnaissance, satellite communications, helicopters, aerial refuelling systems, etc.), 100% of ballistic missile defence capabilities, most nuclear deterrence capabilities, 76,000 US troops deployed in Europe (Kramp-Karrenbauer, 2020a). From Germany's point of view, it would take several decades to reduce this dependency. However, the prevailing view is that under no circumstances can there be any question of Europe decoupling from the US (Steinmeier, 2020). Moreover, to maintain the US commitment to the continents' security, Europe itself needs to try „to stand shoulder to shoulder with US as a strong partner, not as a helpless child“ (Kramp-Karrenbauer, 2020a). These stances reflect deeply entrenched views among German policy-makers (Roos, 2010, pp. 321-323) and this attitude is expected to continue in the future.

To narrow the obvious chasm between security capabilities and expectations, Germany actively supports industrial consolidation at the EU level and the channelling of Member States' efforts towards those industries and technologies that can ensure not only the EU's global competitiveness but also its „technological sovereignty“ (Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy, 2020). Such initiatives are also likely to boost the defence industry with a substantial technological input. The defence industry is an integral part of the European economy and cannot evade the rules of the EU's single market, yet the defence industry is still developing mainly in predominantly national

contexts, often in divergent directions. The German solution proposes to move in the direction of a „Europeanisation“ of the European defence industry. It assumes that control over key technologies would be kept at a national level, but Member States would agree to take measures to increase the interoperability of their armed forces in close coordination with NATO as reflected in the intervention of the German Defence Minister in the Bundestag debate on the subject (Deutscher Bundestag, 2020). Essentially, there is a question of using standardised designs based on uniform capability requirements, which is already beginning to take shape as can be seen in projects such as Eurodrohne or Esoar (European Secure Software-defined Radio). In addition, it is envisaged that the European defence industry could benefit directly or indirectly from a number of public policy measures taken at European level through the EU Industrial Strategy (2020), complemented a year later by the so-called „Three-Point Belt“ Action Plan (2021) to generate synergies between the civil, defence and space industries and promote spin-ins and spin-offs. All these measures are in line with German ambitions for an internationally militarily competitive Europe and are meant to support the ambition of European strategic autonomy. However, it is imperative for Germany that these measures are complemented horizontally by a series of measures that are essential to unlock the full potential of the EU in the field of critical technologies - rewriting the rules of European competition policy, digitising the single market, supporting the creation of strategic alliances around projects capable of generating considerable added value.

In all discussions about reviving European industry and adapting it to the reality of the fourth industrial revolution, Germany most often has France on its side. While France and Germany are generally close in terms of creating industrial capabilities that could boost the potential of the European defence industry, there has been a lack of trust in direct cooperation aimed at the development of important projects to create key European defence capabilities (Major & Mölling, 2020). German ambitions to support cutting-edge technologies through cross-cutting industrial policy measures or to place competition policy of a global perspective, which would allow the emergence of genuine „European champions“ without which the European defence industry could not develop, are opposed by a fairly compact group of states (Stolton, 2020) who fear that they could abuse their dominant position in relation to small and medium-sized competitors on the European market. The alternative of creating strategic alliances around Important Projects of Common European Interest (IPCEI) in an attempt to create conditions for European firms relevant to a given „economic ecosystem“ to collaborate more easily to address technological needs, identify investment opportunities and remove barriers, so that ultimately, become competitive and compete more easily at a global level is in principle accepted by Germany, especially as the alliances created so far around joint projects cover topics of strategic interest from its point of view (power supplies, autonomous vehicles, hydrogen technologies, cybersecurity, etc.). However, Germany, along with France, argue that there is a need for „more strategic thinking“ (Ministry for the Economy and Finance (France);

Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy (Germany), 2019) and EU determination to „strengthen the competitiveness of its industry and master the ongoing industrial transition“ (Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy, 2020). Although Germany itself is still far behind in its commitment to spend 2% of GDP on defence, and the crisis generated by the current pandemic has only further distanced it from this goal (Vogel, 2020, p. 89), from its perspective, it is essential that on the long run the funds allocated by European states for security and defence policies are directed to support major transnational projects such as those aimed at creating a new generation of air combat systems that will level the gap between capabilities and expectations and transform the profile of European armed forces.

We also cannot ignore the existence of certain nuances between the positions of the two in the shaping of the security concept of the European continent. These can be explained in terms of fundamental differences in the strategic culture of the two countries and translate into different interpretations of the idea of national interest, different preferences in dealing with security issues, and relations with other partners or regarding the use of force (Major, 2021a). If France tends to engage more freely in dealing with international problems, particularly those concerning international peace and security, starting from the assumption that in dealing with international challenges it has only two alternatives „either taking back control of our destiny or aligning ourselves with any power whatsoever, thereby abandoning the idea of any strategy of our own“ (Macron, 2020) and always animated by the desire to preserve its „autonomy of assessment, decision, and action“ (Ministère des Armées, 2021, p. 29), Germany remains committed to a coordinated engagement with its strategic partners, NATO and the European Union, which it considers as the anchors of its security and defence policy. It is important for Germany that both organisations remain as strong as possible as only then can its security be guaranteed (Kramp-Karrenbauer, 2020b, p. B 24467). Of course, there is no question of emancipation from NATO or the EU in the case of France. On the contrary, NATO and the European Defence remain for it „two pillars of European collective security“ (Macron, 2020). However, France tends to water down the significance of the existing institutional security and defence framework, by referring to Europe in a broader sense and not only strictly to the EU (Kempin, 2021, p. 47) or making distinctions between political and military cooperation within NATO (Major, 2021b). From a German perspective, French tendencies to frequently revise its own positions are essentially nothing new, but their recurrent manifestations since Emmanuel Macron took office have become annoying, especially as they concern both the EU's relationship with NATO and cooperation with the EU's strategic partners (e.g. Russia). Some of these have proved difficult to accept for Germany, as for instance, President Macron's proposal for a European Intervention Initiative (EI2) or the interpretation of the concept of strategic autonomy in terms of supporting the EU's transformation into a geopolitical actor. They have most often required difficult negotiations to accommodate the two

positions and to find a compromise formula (Bundesregierung, Presse- und Informationsamt (BPA), 2018).

## Conclusions

The capability-expectations gap allowed Hill to demonstrate that to close the gap and relieve the emerging European foreign policy from the negative tensions that surrounded it, either the capabilities have to be increased or the expectations to be decreased. In a world marked by complex interdependencies, by a significant fragmentation of power relations, it is obvious that the EU must build and preserve a space of strategic autonomy that allows it to protect and promote its interests, values, and principles. This paper has sought to highlight how the EU is trying to carve out for itself an area of strategic autonomy. Given the limitations imposed on this analysis, the discussion was limited to the positions expressed by France and Germany but managed to provide an insight into a complex reality and the options being considered to better manage it. Equally, this contribution has highlighted the usefulness of the analytical framework proposed by Professor Christopher Hill to assess the EU's ambitions for strategic autonomy.

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