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A STRONGER ALLIANCE

THE FUTURE OF EUROPEAN SECURITY

REPORT



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EUROPEAN STRATEGIC AUTONOMY QUEST 'NEEDS POLITICAL WILL'

A stronger collective political will, a clearer consensus on the true meaning of 'European strategic autonomy' and a heavy dose of pragmatism must be combined for Europe to fulfil its ambitions to both protect citizens, and more powerfully defend its values and interests on the world stage.

Those were among the conclusions as experts and guests gathered at the well-attended Friends of Europe security policy summit, A Stronger Alliance: the future of European security, in Brussels on 4 June.

Participants at the annual flagship event of our Peace, Security and Defence programme discussed the various interpretations of 'European strategic autonomy', as well as how it was viewed from outside the EU. A session was also held on the proliferation and impact of disinformation.

Questions remained over what the phrase 'strategic autonomy' meant to different leaders and member states, said panellists.

The EU was serious about taking it forward, but "do we have a common understanding as to what that level of ambition would represent?", asked moderator and Senior Fellow at Friends of Europe, **Jamie Shea**.

"Is it simply a military concept or meant to be something broader, encompassing Europe's more general geopolitical and economic role? Is this something that's going to be top-down from Brussels or more bottom-up from the member states? Can it also improve the performance of related organisations like NATO?"

It's a valid concept to pursue, but we should be careful of 'sloganism', warned **Jaap de Hoop Scheffer**, former NATO Secretary General and Friends of Europe Trustee.

As a new post-election political cycle begins, now isn't the appropriate time to re-write political treaties or reform the EU institutions, said panellists, most of whom said it was more pragmatic to continue working on the basis of a "coalition of the willing".

Among the EU's most obvious and most pressing common interests were addressing a "clear and present danger" in Africa and instability in the western Balkans, warned defence experts.

"Is it simply a military concept or meant to be something broader, encompassing Europe's more general geopolitical and economic role?"

Jamie Shea

Senior Fellow at Friends of Europe

“The ultimate goal is the freedom of action, whenever it is necessary”

Natalia Pouzyreff

Secretary of the Defence Committee in France's National Assembly

WHAT DOES STRATEGIC AUTONOMY LOOK LIKE?

It's often portrayed as the 'magic formula' that will unlock Europe's ability to protect itself and better defend its interests on the world stage, said Jamie Shea in introducing the panel debate.

“But there's a degree of confusion – what does the term mean exactly?” he asked.

Using the broadest definition, 'autonomy' includes the ability to protect our strategic interests and European citizens, inside our borders and abroad, argued **Natalia Pouzyreff**, Secretary of the Defence Committee in France's National Assembly.

“The ultimate goal is the freedom of action, whenever it is necessary.”

She continued by pointing out that it was unlikely a coalition of European forces would intervene without its NATO allies in a “high intensity” situation, but there were scenarios where a “coalition between ourselves” would be beneficial.

Europe should not only think of conflict but also needs to find answers to crises, including humanitarian or security situations, she said: “For instance, if something should happen in the Balkans, how should we react together?”

Citing other “hypotheses” she also asked what would happen if EU citizens needed to be rescued from South Korea, or Europe had to deal with a terrorism threat from Africa?

Why do we want to be autonomous? asked Director of the Instituto Affari Internazionali, **Nathalie Tocci**.

Not to be more protectionist, nor to be a “power in the great power competition that is unfolding” but simply to “be able to interact with great and small powers... in order to protect and to promote our interests in line with the values of what the European treaties are,” she said.

“To me it's much more than defence, it is security in the wider sense of the word,” added Jaap de Hoop Scheffer.

This includes how we screen Chinese investments, forming a European industrial policy and being more innovative on technology, he told participants, stating: “Why are we in such trouble with Huawei at the moment? Because we simply are lagging behind.”

He said competition policy should be part of strategic autonomy and also raised the issue of Nord Stream 2 and increasing “energy dependence on Russia”.

Although autonomy should not only be viewed through the prism of military action, he added there was likely to be a need for hard power in certain scenarios.

“What is the over-arching geopolitical reality? It’s that we Europeans should avoid becoming the nut in the nutcracker operated by the Chinese and the Americans.

“And if you want to prevent [that], it also includes Europe projecting hard military power.”

Europe had, to date, not been successful in sending out any battle groups and needed to be “realistic” about its ambitions of autonomy, said Estonia’s Defence Minister **Jüri Luik**, who added that it was an “issue of political will”.

CULTURE SHOCK: CREATING A CONSENSUS

Europe still lacks what French colleagues would call a collective ‘strategic culture’, said Jüri Luik.

“A culture of readiness, a military culture of understanding that there are circumstances where using military force is warranted – I don’t think there is consensus in Europe on that. There are countries who are extremely careful, both in NATO and in the EU,” he said.

He said that while “big vision talk” around strategic autonomy being the motor of further integration was “unrealistic”, Europe can quickly and feasibly address the military culture issue. National military efforts could be included to help create it. The Athena mechanism of common funding of defence efforts, the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) and European Defence Fund (EDF) could also be further developed, he said.

Citing French President Macron’s 10-country-strong European Intervention Initiative (EI2), Natalia Pouzyreff said its intention was to share that common strategic culture.

“If we don’t speak the same language, how are we going to be able to plan for such scenarios?

“When we don’t have the political will, we’ll not get there. And then we end on the wrong side of the nutcracker,” added Jaap de Hoop Scheffer.

He said, as a European, he would “hate” the words of his NATO predecessor, George Robertson, to come true – that Europe remains a “financial and economic giant, a political adolescent and a military pygmy”.

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Nathalie Tocci

Director of the Istituto Affari Internazionali

WHERE ARE THE CAPABILITIES?

What tools does Europe have at hand to achieve strategic autonomy and – beyond political will – what does it need?

Estonia’s Jüri Luik said while it was still “clearly springtime in EU defence matters” there were many new joint initiatives, from PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation) to the EDF.

But he said it should be borne in mind that EU treaties do not allow defence cooperation on a level some would ideally want.

The “acronym soup” of CARD, PESCO, MPCC and EDF may sound “mad” to some non-EU colleagues but many would appreciate their significance, said Nathalie Tocci.

“Security and defence have traditionally been the ugly ducklings of European integration – what has been done over the last years is no less than historic in nature. That is not to say we are today strategically autonomous... the progress made is only the first building blocks”.

However, without French and German leadership the project would not work, said Jaap de Hoop Scheffer.

He voiced support for Macron’s European Intervention Initiative, while acknowledging that many were uncomfortable with it being outside the EU framework.

Citing Brexit as one reason that we should “go with” the Macron initiative – as it includes the UK in its group of 10 – he said it gives Europe the opportunity to keep the British close in the realm of security and defence.

“We should have the Brits with us. We can’t do without them, no matter how much we dislike Brexit.”

“After Brexit, France will be the only [EU] nation with a tradition of projecting hard military power.”

In response to questions over whether there should be a more formal arrangement to “tie Britain in”, there was agreement this would be preferable.

On the wider question of whether the whole strategic autonomy discussion should be “institutionalised”, panel members agreed it was more pragmatic to work on the basis of cooperation both inside and outside the EU institutions.

“Let’s try to get it done, which is more important than starting to answer all kinds of institutional questions, because then the EU will be choking again,” said De Hoop Scheffer.

“It will always be coalitions of the willing, so let’s not be afraid.”

RISK ASSESSMENT: ARE EUROPEAN HEADS IN THE SAND?

That the world is changing is nothing new, but it's currently changing at a speed never seen before, said Spain's Chief of Defence, **General Fernando Alejandro Martínez**.

In 2019 global threats have become increasingly unpredictable as we now face hybrid warfare, a complex coordination of conventional and non-conventional threats like cyber attacks, terrorism, organised crime and disinformation.

"State and non-state actors are involved and we need to urgently update the perspective and the tools, in military approaches and beyond," he said.

Several panellists referred to Africa and the Balkans when discussing areas on which Europe should focus more sharply.

Gen Alejandro said the EU needed more commitment "particularly in Africa where we Europeans face a clear and present danger".

He added that "no matter how much noise there is" the EU must maintain and reinforce the transatlantic link with North America and NATO, and "pay our share".

"We have a responsibility to cooperate, to provide leadership across the world, or the vacuum that we do not fill, the flank that we leave open, will be closed by third parties," he said.

There may be no common strategy in Europe, but it needs to know what it will do if "things go wrong in the Sahel" said Jaap de Hoop Scheffer.

"If Boko Haram meets al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, meets the remnants of Isis, I could very well imagine there might be the need to project hard military power.

"In such a scenario we really can't go to the Oval Office in Washington, ring the doorbell and say 'please Mr Trump can you help us'?"

"The same goes for when the demons in the Balkans rise again... we are neglecting the Western Balkans. Travel through the region and you'll see how Turkey, Saudi Arabia, China and Russia are competing for influence. It is still not yet a stable part of our backyard."

Natalia Pouzyreff said France, along with partners and allies – including Estonia, Spain, the UK and Germany – was already sustaining a level of effort to aid stability in the Sahel.

"But France's vocation is not to stand alone. Sustaining these efforts over years will be very difficult, and we're paying a high price."

"It's really time we take our responsibilities, we need to be ambitious and we certainly cannot bury our heads in the sand"

Natalia Pouzyreff

Secretary of the Defence Committee
in France's National Assembly

“Russia is not going to wage a war with Europe or part of it. So why squander time and resources on countering a non-existent Russian threat?”

Alexey Drobinin

Deputy Director of the Foreign Policy Planning Department at the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

When walking around the European Parliament, she sees ‘ostriches with their heads in the ground’.

“It’s really time we take our responsibilities, we need to be ambitious and we certainly cannot bury our heads in the sand”.

THE VIEW FROM OUTSIDE

What are the perspectives from outside the EU on talk of a greater European strategic autonomy?

Firstly, providing an analysis from inside Europe, Nathalie Tocci said that since 2016 – when the EU’s Global Strategy was published (48 hours after the UK’s Brexit referendum) – the EU had lurched from existential crisis to euphoria to depression to a slight post-European elections revival, with “the spectre of a fascist Europe” having receded, if not disappeared.

“What is interesting is that this happened at a time in which... the world is moving towards a more multipolar power distribution. We had the illusion back then that that could lead to a further strengthening of the multilateral system. We know now that greater fragmentation of power in the international system has actually led to greater global power competition and rivalry.”

Moderator and Friends of Europe Senior Fellow **Paul Taylor** asked panellist **Alexey Drobinin**, Deputy Director of the Foreign Policy Planning Department at the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, what attitudes Russia had towards European strategic autonomy.

Is it a threat that must be prevented, an opportunity to work on common interests and gradually ease the USA out of the security picture, or something that is “not worth losing any sleep over?”, he asked.

The general assessment in Russia is that the autonomy aspiration points to the willingness of some European leaders to “seek a new place for Europe in a world undergoing deep and rapid transformation”, and “in line with the larger dynamic of an emerging multipolar world order”, said Drobinin.

But he said there was already a “growing concern” about the military bond between the EU and NATO.

If EU resources were put at NATO’s disposal for the sake of containing Russia, “it is nothing but a policy based on illusions and a poor reading of the geopolitical reality,” he said.

“Russia is not going to wage a war with Europe or part of it. So why squander time and resources on countering a non-existent Russian threat?”

He said there was a risk that “the political clout and material assets of the EU will be utilised to bolster the US and NATO’s military activity on the so-called eastern flank”. But in Russia’s view this activity is one of the key factors fuelling geopolitical and military tensions on the continent, he said.

Drobinin added that the flagship programme of PESCO “largely corresponds” with the declared interests of NATO and raised the issue of the European Commission using its budget to upgrade roads and pipelines.

“If that is so, it is not quite clear – at least to us – what strategic autonomy we are talking about for Europe.”

“We would welcome more transparency regarding the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy,” he said, adding that they hoped it would “factor in Russia not as a stereotyped adversary but rather as a partner”.

“It is still possible to build a viable collective security system in Europe that reflects the threats and challenges of 21st century and not of the previous one,” he said.

Speaking by link from the US, **Ambassador Christopher Hill**, Chief Advisor to the Chancellor for Global Engagement at Denver University, and former US Ambassador to Iraq, said talk of European identity was a “hardy perennial of the transatlantic relationship and one we should try to develop further”.

He said he couldn’t report that all was well and that the US had an “unshakeable commitment to transatlanticism”.

“We have a lot of problems here right now,” he said.

He said there was a sense of frustration that US partners “talk the talk but don’t walk the walk in terms of defence outlays” – with not all NATO countries fulfilling the pledge to spend 2% of their GDP on defence – and that somehow the US has been victimised in its international activities.

Hill said he never thought he would have lived to see the day where the US’s “national narrative is that of the victim”.

Whenever the US has a problem with a country “tariffs have become the new paradigm”, said Hill.

“These are very new concepts and, frankly, very uncomfortable concepts.”

He said a new US administration would not be able to turn the clock back but would have to look forward and re-shape relationships.

“If I were European I would certainly be looking at more autonomy in these issues”

Ambassador Christopher Hill

Chief Advisor to the Chancellor for Global Engagement at Denver University, and former US Ambassador to Iraq

“For China and Asian countries, I see the EU as more of an economic entity, instead of a defence one”

Yan Yan

Director of the Research Center of Oceans Law and Policy at the National Institute for South China Sea Studies

Looking back to his time in the Balkans in the '90s, he said Russia was considered as a partner.

“Yet I think right now it's fair to say we are in a very difficult position with respect to Russia. It's not just Ukraine, it's a lot of other issues and this issue of the eastern flank, which I think is a challenge for Europe internally, is also a challenge for us – many of these countries say we are happy to be in NATO but we want some sign that NATO is in us.”

Earlier attempts to establish patterns of cooperation with China were “not happening in any way, shape or form” at the moment, he said, and the US was going to have to deal with it.

“We have 18 months of this administration. It is an administration that uses brute force in many different ways and... if I were European I would certainly be looking at more autonomy in these issues, especially on the issue of economic matters, where you have the dollar as the currency that settles energy contracts yet there's a growing concern that we are using that to enforce sanctions in a sort of extra-territorial sense.”

On the view from China, **Yan Yan**, Director of the Research Center of Oceans Law and Policy at the National Institute for South China Sea Studies, said she wanted to start with a question: “How does the EU see a rising China?...As a potential partner or a rival?”

Citing the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation she said the core relationship “still relies on economic cooperation” and that China and the EU are cooperative partners for upholding multilateralism.

“For China and Asian countries, I see the EU as more of an economic entity, instead of a defence one.”

“Compared to the US, the EU does not have military power capability projection in the South China Sea and other maritime areas in the Asia Pacific. That's the difference.

“I just can't see the EU as a defence or military or security power in our region.”

CONCLUSION: 'NO NEED TO HIDE'

While the latest European elections “brought many populists to town” it also brought a majority of people, parties and new MEPs who believe in the EU, said moderator Jamie Shea.

Recently polling and debates conducted by Friends of Europe had indicated that citizens want a Europe which protects, which is the “shaper and not the victim of history, which defends its values and interests successfully in the wider world, and which increasingly

brings its geopolitical role and influence more in line with its traditional, powerful global economic role and influence,” he said.

In his concluding remarks, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer observed that a discussion on the EU and defence is also a discussion on upholding the international rules-based system.

“This is what the EU is all about, it’s about values, and it’s about upholding the international system and it’s about taking responsibility [for that].

“And I think in this regard we Europeans could do with a bit more self-esteem and a bit more self-confidence.

“We are a huge market, we are of great importance both to the US and to China, and to Russia.

“There is no need to hide under the bedcovers.”

BUYING INFLUENCE

Sebastian Bay, a senior expert at the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga, focused on the ease with which social media is manipulated by the readily-available ability to pay for views, likes and machine-written positive comments.

This “elaborate industry” includes vending machines in public spaces, such as subway stations in Russia and the Czech Republic, selling social media ‘likes’.

In an experiment carried out at the centre, they took their own YouTube video and Googled ‘purchase YouTube views’ in order to buy from one of many companies selling fake social media engagement.

Having bought 2,000 views, 100 likes and 10 positive comments for \$16.54, within one week they saw increased “authentic engagement”, due to the manipulation of the algorithm.

Bay said their research had concluded that: whether being used for popularity, profits, the spread of hate speech, political gain or election manipulation, the scale of this market – and the underlying infrastructure – is extensive; the openness of it is “striking”, including providers advertising on Google and Bing; Russian service providers dominate the manipulation market; and self-regulation is not working.

“disinformation is not just an abstract threat to freedom of speech, it’s a threat to individuals... and also a threat to national security. It is being used to incite the feeling of hatred in people, and because it spreads across borders in a heartbeat, it’s dangerous”

Jessikka Aro

Investigative journalist at Finnish public service broadcaster YLE

TROLLING THE MESSENGER

Investigative journalist at Finnish public service broadcaster YLE, Jessikka Aro, has endured death threats, lawsuits and relentless large-scale harassment for her reporting on troll factories on the front line of the information war.

She addressed the summit explaining how her life had changed after she started investigating Russian information warfare, specifically social media propaganda troll factories, during their infancy in 2014.

With attacks already being mounted against opinion leaders, for example on their comments about Russian activities in Ukraine, she said she wanted to know “how these trolls influenced normal people who use the internet”.

As a result, she became a target of fake news and disinformation in Russia. This included claims that she was a ‘NATO insider’ masquerading as a journalist, along with “hateful phone calls”, threats, intimidation and harassment.

“I realised why this disinformation is not just an abstract threat to freedom of speech, it’s a threat to individuals... and also a threat to national security. It is being used to incite the feeling of hatred in people, and because it spreads across borders in a heartbeat, it’s dangerous,” she said.

“People believe this stuff and act upon it.”

Within days of her story being published a Facebook group called Russian Troll Army – which still exists – was set up, said Aro. “It created an atmosphere, using psychological warfare means, to claim it’s a normal use of freedom of speech to write that Jessikka Aro should be dead, her stomach should be slit open, she should die of uranium poisoning, she is mentally ill, she is a NATO troll.”

Aro, who is now writing a book on the topic, said her investigations on the impact of systematic trolling and fake news had concluded that: some Finns had already been silenced and scared into quitting social media; some had lost the ability to distinguish the truth from lies; and some had started to spread propaganda on their own networks.



Sebastian Bay, Senior Expert at NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, Riga



Paul Taylor, Moderator and Friends of Europe Senior Fellow



Jessikka Aro, award-winning investigative journalist at Finland's public service broadcaster, YLE



Yan Yan, Director of the Research Center of Oceans Law and Policy, National Institute for the South China Sea Studies (NISCSS); Nathalie Tocci, Director of the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI); Alexey Drobinin, Deputy Director of the Foreign Policy Planning Department at the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs



Jüri Luik, Minister of Defence, Estonia; General Fernando Alejandro Martínez, Chief of the Defence, Spain; Natalia Pouzyreff, Secretary of the Defence Committee, National Assembly, France; Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, former Secretary General of NATO and Trustee of Friends of Europe



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