PREREQUISITES FOR EUROPEAN STRATEGIC SECURITY AUTONOMY

Review Article

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Abstract: Within the discipline of international relations, and through the application of relevant scientific methods, such as content analysis, including inductive, deductive, and synthetic methods, this paper examines the concept of European strategic security autonomy, its substance, scope, and limitations. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that the functional verification of European strategic autonomy, the security "maturation" of Europe, and ultimately the assumption of responsibility for its own security, rest upon the fulfilment of several fundamental prerequisites which, for the purpose of clearer conceptual understanding, may be broadly grouped into three categories: political or political and institutional, organizational and functional, and material or resource-based prerequisites. One of the conclusions that emerges from the analysis is that European strategic security autonomy remains in an early stage of development due to the non-fulfilment of these prerequisites. Moreover, under present circumstances, Europe embodied in the institutional, legal, and political structures of the European Union can hardly be identified as an autonomous actor capable and sufficiently capacitated to assume responsibility for its own security and that of its immediate neighborhood.

Keywords: European strategic security autonomy; European Union; Common Security and Defence Policy; political and institutional prerequisites; organizational and functional prerequisites; material (resource-based) prerequisites.

INTRODUCTION

Although conceived and initially developed as an economic project, the process of European integration and cooperation has been accompanied by sporadic, typically unsuccessful, initiatives aimed at strengthening Europe's position, which is embodied in the European Union, as an autonomous security actor on the international stage. With the development of relevant EU policies

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in the field of security and defense, particularly under the influence of increasingly dynamic changes in the international order over the past two decades, the need to build European strategic security autonomy has been frequency emphasized, which is viewed as a framework through which relatively independent European security interests may be articulated, thereby enabling the Union to achieve functional verification as an autonomous security actor at both the regional and global levels.

At the center of this analysis is the very concept of European strategic security autonomy, its substance, scope, and limitations, and, in particular, the key prerequisites whose fulfilment fundamentally determines the functional verification of strategic autonomy. The phenomenon of European strategic autonomy is examined through several conceptually, logically, and methodologically interconnected sections and subsections. The first section defines the contemporary meaning of the concept of European strategic autonomy, its essential components and highlights the differentiated approaches to its interpretation, both in political domain and in official documents. The second section is divided into three subsections and considers the prerequisites for achieving European strategic security autonomy, which, taking into account their nature, are grouped into three main categories: political and institutional, organisational–functional, and material (resource-based). It should be noted that these prerequisites, regardless of the category to which they nominally belong, are deeply interdependent and mutually conditioned.

The contemporary concept of European strategic security autonomy

Initiatives aimed at developing an autonomous (Western) European security identity are not of recent origin; they can be traced back to the late 1940s and early 1950s. This is evident both in the establishment of the Western European Union (WEU) through the 1948 Brussels Treaty and in the French proposals for a European Political Community and a European Defence Community, as reflected in the unratified 1952 Paris Treaty. However, contemporary aspirations to build European strategic autonomy[1] were primarily prompted by fears of a potential shift in U.S. foreign policy concerning the defense of the European continent, which was especially pronounced during the administration of Donald Trump. The relative deterioration of military, political, and economic relations between the transatlantic partners (Dimitrova, 2020; Görgen, 2021), coupled with Washington's demands that Europe assume greater responsibility for its own security, including financial contributions to NATO's collective defense system, shifted the focus of European capitals toward the development of a concept of European strategic security autonomy. This concept became coherently articulated in the 2016 European Union Global Strategy (European External Action Service, 2016: 19), after which it emerged as an indispensable reference point in discussions of virtually any aspect of EU security and defense policy (Witney, 2024; Ringsmose & Webber, 2020). However, the establishment

and popularization of this concept have raised more questions than they have resolved, including significant uncertainties regarding its definition, content, and scope (Zielinski, 2020; Helwig & Sinkkonen, 2022; Rekowski, 2023). From the perspective of U.S. geopolitical interests, the most problematic were interpretations of strategic autonomy in an absolute sense, implying institutional, strategic, and structural differentiation from the US and the construction of independent European military–security structures as a counterpart to NATO. Such an understanding meant replacing NATO, the decades-long Euro-Atlantic security umbrella, with narrower autonomous European structures, thereby rapidly weakening the U.S. military presence on the continent. By contrast, relative interpretations of strategic autonomy which, it appears, the architects of the concept had in mind from the very beginning (European External Action Service, 2016: 19) and which eventually gained the support of all European leaders (European External Action Service, 2020), mean that the role of the US and NATO in Europe's defense remains indispensable, while Europe's security autonomy, which is embodied institutionally in the European Union, is focused on the independent regulation of issues that do not lie at the core of Washington's strategic priorities. At the core of this interpretation lies the development of an autonomous European identity within NATO, that is, the creation of its "European pillar," which would introduce new organizational and functional qualities into the Alliance, but without establishing separate European military–security structures that would replace NATO. In this sense, the concept of strategic autonomy, although it takes the EU as its primary institutional reference point, extends beyond EU policies alone and requires a broader platform involving both its member states and non-EU NATO members such as Great Britain or Norway. The most frequently cited argument in support of the relative interpretation of strategic autonomy stems from Article 42(2) of the Lisbon Treaty on European Union, which stipulates that the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), and potentially a future Common Defence, must respect the obligations that member states assume under other military and security arrangements, primarily NATO, and may develop only with full regard for all frameworks and mechanisms established within those arrangements. In other words, from the moment of its treaty-based inception, the EU's CSDP has been positioned as secondary to the military and security commitments that member states undertake within NATO.

European strategic security autonomy can be defined as Europe's ability, as a political and security actor in the international arena, to make decisions independently and to possess the necessary means, capacities, and capabilities to implement those decisions in an autonomous and effective manner whenever required (Zandeel et al., 2020: 2). Its realization is determined by the fulfilment of a set of preconditions at both the internal and external levels, which condition its materialization, developmental trajectory, functional scope, and limitations. These prerequisites are deeply intertwined and mutually reinforcing, and none of them can be examined in isolation.

Prerequisites of strategic autonomy and their classification

Evidently, the existence of European strategic autonomy presupposes, above all, Europe's capability to independently and effectively make decisions through which it articulates its security-related positions and interests, as well as its ability to command appropriate resources and capacities necessary for their practical implementation. For the purposes of a clearer understanding, the prerequisites of European strategic autonomy are conventionally divided into political and institutional, organizational and functional, and material (resource-based) categories.

Political and Institutional Prerequisites

This group of prerequisites encompasses the elements that constitute the necessary internal and external political and institutional context within which European strategic autonomy is shaped and implemented, including the procedural modalities of formulating and executing the European Union's foreign and security policies. The internal aspect of the political and institutional prerequisites refers, among other things, to the need to overcome the status-related and interest-based differences among EU member states in the fields of security and defense, their diverse security traditions and cultures, and, in particular, the necessity of addressing systemic weaknesses in the process of shaping the key aspects of the EU's CSDP, as the framework in which the Union's strategic autonomy should be fully articulated. According to the Lisbon Treaty provisions, the Union's policies in the field of foreign and security affairs rest on mechanisms of intergovernmental cooperation, which constitutes a serious obstacle to the effective functioning of the European organization in this context. Occasional initiatives aimed at implementing treaty reforms that would enable qualified majority voting in this area as well (Coenig, 2020; Navarra & Jančová, 2023; Politico, 2023) have not produced results, primarily due to resistance from a group of member states unwilling to transfer the exercise of their sovereign prerogatives in the field of foreign and security policy to the supranational level. The existing manifestations of the principle of flexibility in the process of European integration and cooperation, such as the mechanism of constructive abstention or the rudimentary forms of enhanced cooperation that can also be identified in these areas, function as extraordinary instruments for overcoming decision-making deadlock, but in no way represent a systematic approach to mobilizing the legitimacy of the Union's actions in the realm of foreign policy. At the same time, the slowness that characterizes the Union in these areas, both in terms of decision-making and in the implementation of adopted decisions, has steered member states toward informal forms of cooperation in the military and security domain. Examples include the Northern Group (NG), which brings together 12 participants, including Sweden and Finland, which, after decades of military neutrality, became NATO members in April 2023 and March 2024,

respectively; the European Intervention Initiative (EI2), which was launched at the initiative of French President Emmanuel Macron and comprises 13 states; and the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), which was established at the initiative of Great Britain and which comprises, alongside Great Britain, Northern European and Baltic states.

The development of an autonomous European security identity, despite certain external homogenizing factors such as the conflict in Ukraine, is considerably hindered by the diverse security traditions of European states, their differing historical experiences, and their incongruent security cultures. This also includes divergent perceptions regarding how best to ensure the military security of European states. Among these are countries with a strong Atlanticist orientation, such as the Scandinavian and Baltic states or Poland; states that remain committed to their military-neutral status, such as Austria or Ireland; and states which, like France, despite their membership in NATO, aspire to the development of a more robust European defense core (Lefebvre, 2024).

Regarding the external dimension, one of the key political and institutional prerequisites for European strategic autonomy involves positioning the European Union as an independent actor in international relations and security, particularly in relation to other relevant actors, such as the US, which has significantly shaped all previous processes of substantive and functional design of security cooperation policies on the European continent. The transformation of the Western European Union into a "sleeping beauty" (Bassets, 1993; Jørgensen, 2019; Тучић, 2023), the "undermining" of the Paris Agreement by plans for the rearmament of the Federal Republic of Germany and its inclusion in military arrangements, and especially developments in the post-bipolar era, when the role of NATO within a changed security paradigm was questioned, indicate that one of the primary objectives of the US was to prevent any European ambitions that might threaten American interests on the continent. American support for strengthening capacities and relatively more autonomous security action by European countries is tightly controlled, with the central principle being the empowerment of European countries exclusively within the functional frameworks of Washington's foreign policy, including countering any initiatives that might jeopardize NATO's role in the defense of the European continent, thereby preserving U.S. presence in Europe. Experience shows that the only acceptable form of European strategic autonomy for the US is one that is extremely relative, subordinated to broader American interests, and achievable in a controlled manner within existing structures managed by Washington, without questioning them, while simultaneously contributing to their enrichment and strengthening. However, the problem is that such interpretations, not only by the US but also by European leaders, effectively undermine the concept of European strategic autonomy, bringing it close to complete nullification. In this context, the position of the Union should also be assessed in relation to key current events, most prominently the conflict in Ukraine. While it is recognized that the conflict between Russia and the political West in Ukraine has

significantly contributed to further relativizing the concept of European strategic autonomy, homogenizing the Euro-Atlantic bloc under NATO, its implications for the further development of the concept appear multilayered. This is a conflict after which, as frequently emphasized, nothing will remain the same in the political, military, economical, or even cultural sense (Andor & Optenhögel, 2023; Pushkar, 2023; Qaisrani et al., 2023; Ozili, 2024), and its repercussions are most strongly projected onto the European continent. Therefore, the Ukrainian conflict, especially in its initial phase, manifested as a turning point in the process of building European strategic autonomy. Instead of recognizing the historical moment and taking steps toward a stronger positioning of the Union as an independent political and security actor, which would have undoubtedly meant distancing from Washington on certain issues and prioritization of European over American interests, the majority of European leaders accepted an irrational framework regarding the Russian security threat (Klymak & Vlandas, 2023) and identified NATO as the key guarantor of European security, thereby definitively verifying a highly relativized understanding of European strategic autonomy. This means that Europe, regardless of the cost, once again accepted subordination to the broader Atlanticist framework (Sierakowski, 2024), which significantly deprives European strategic autonomy of its capacities and substance. Yet, it is not simply a matter of failing to recognize the historical moment; rather, it reflects deliberate and systematic actions, as evidenced, for example, by statements of certain European leaders regarding the nature and purpose of the Minsk agreements (Schwarz, 2022), the intensity of anti-Russian campaigns following the outbreak of the conflict, and especially the unwillingness of leading European countries to assume responsibility for the possible suspension of Article 10 of the Washington Treaty, in accordance with Moscow's demands, thereby directly influencing the prevention of armed conflict (Nitoiu & Pasatoiu, 2023). Instead, Europe has been placed in the most complex security situation since the end of World War II, with real tendencies toward further deterioration, particularly considering the militarization of the continent, especially its eastern part, with American weaponry and military infrastructure. Although some perceive these processes as the construction of a "Fortress Europe" (Rogers, 2024), while the building of the largest NATO base in Europe, on the Black Sea in Constanța, Romania, is metaphorically described as "giving Dracula some teeth" (Grain, 2024), the fact remains that Europe, in the event of further escalation of the conflict, is most exposed to destructive impacts, and a conscious intensification of the war-related security risk cannot, by any means, be in the interest of European states and peoples.

Organizational and functional prerequisites

Organizational and functional prerequisites refer to the necessity of having the organizational and implementation capacities through which the EU's autonomous actions in the military and security domain could be put into in prac-

tice. Since the Saint-Malo meeting in 1998, the European Council in Cologne in 1999, and, particularly, the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, significant, but still insufficient, progress has been made in developing EU capacities that would allow for more independent action and recognition as an essential security actor. Perhaps the most significant step forward has been the establishment of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) within the CSDP (Council of the European Union, 2017), which provides a permanent basis for military and security cooperation among member states, as opposed to the previous *ad hoc* arrangements. Cooperation within PESCO is based on the principle of voluntariness, which is implemented through various projects in which currently all EU member states participate except Malta, but also non-EU countries such as the US, Canada, or Norway, which, by its nature, resembles the more established instrument of enhanced cooperation. Another significant development for strengthening the EU's operational capabilities was the establishment of EU Battle Groups in 2007, multinational forces of up to 1,500 troops tasked with prevention, stabilization, crisis management, and rescue and humanitarian missions, relying on Chapter VIII of the UN Charter, which enables the contractual delegation of such tasks by the Security Council to relevant regional security actors. However, primarily due to the lack of political will and the unanimity required in the Council of the European Union when deciding on their activation, the battle groups, despite numerous opportunities, have not yet been practically verified. One of the fundamental issues concerning the implementation of military activities by the EU relates to the modalities of their financing, especially since, under existing treaty provisions, budgetary support for their implementation is not possible. A transitional solution has been found through the creation of voluntary funds, such as the former ATHENS program or the current European Peace Facility Fund, yet this method of financing cannot be considered fully satisfactory, as EU action depends directly on the willingness of member states to provide financial support at a given time. While it was a member, Great Britain allocated approximately one-quarter of the funds for implementing EU military missions and operations (Shea, 2020: 89), meaning that the situation in Brussels today is further complicated. The lack of sufficient EU-owned capacities, combined with the need to address Washington's concerns regarding NATO's continued role in European security, led to the so-called Berlin Plus arrangements[2] in 2002, a system of seven agreements between the EU and NATO that regulate various forms of cooperation, including granting the EU the possibility to use NATO planning and non-strategic operational capacities for the implementation of its own crisis management military operations (Williams, 2018). The most well-known examples of the application of the Berlin Plus arrangements are the peacekeeping mission named Concordia in North Macedonia in 2003, and Operation Althea, which has been conducted in BiH since 2004. However, to understand the impact of the Berlin Plus arrangements on the development of European strategic autonomy, several points must be highlighted. First, the need to use NATO capacities undoubtedly places the EU in a vulnerable position, as this possibility is conditional upon

the unanimous consent of the North Atlantic Council, in which states with unresolved political issues with Brussels, such as Turkey, are represented. It is well known, for example, that the Concordia operation was delayed by more than six months due to Turkey's blockade, and the EU was frequently forced to make various compromises, including allowing countries whose political and normative alignment with Brussels was questionable to participate in joint military activities. The second point concerns the fact that Berlin Plus is based on postulates proclaimed at the Washington Summit in 1999 (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 1999), such as "NATO has the pre-emptive right" and the Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) mechanism. The pre-emptive right reflects NATO's preemptive role in crisis management, requiring NATO, before considering the possibility of allowing the EU to use its capacities, to adopt a formal decision saying that it, as an organization, has no interest in being engaged in the specific issue. The Combined Joint Task Force mechanism, reflecting the principle of flexibility in crisis management, allows member states to abstain from participating in joint military activities if they assess a particular issue as not being in their immediate interest, while their abstention does not prevent other members from participating in crisis management activities, including those led by the EU. Both postulates highlight the secondary position of the EU within such arrangements, regardless of subsequent enhancements to overall EU–NATO cooperation or to the original Berlin Plus, which were achieved through joint declarations in 2016, 2018, and 2023 (NATO, 2016, 2018, 2023) and complementary documents adopted individually by the organizations, such as NATO's new Strategic Concept (NATO, 2022) or the EU Strategic Compass for Security and Defence (European External Action Service, 2022; Тучић, 2023). Currently, slightly over 4,000 personnel are engaged in 11 civilian missions and 7 military missions and operations under the EU CSDP, which are carried out in Africa, the Middle East, the Western Balkans, and Eastern Europe, along with two combined missions in the Sahel and the Gulf of Guinea (European External Action Service, 2024). However, the predominance of civilian over military missions and operations, the geographical emphasis on Africa and the Middle East relative to the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, and, finally, the very nature of most missions generally focused on building local security capacities, post-conflict stabilization, or safeguarding overseas transport routes also point to the EU's secondary significance as a regional and global security actor.

Material (resource-based) prerequisites

Material prerequisites generally refer to the need for an appropriate technological and industrial base capable of continuously meeting the military requirements of European countries, including the implementation of joint activities within the EU's CSDP. A more intensive development of the Union's military and industrial complex, both for commercial and security purposes, has been evident since the early 2000s. To date, a fairly broad spectrum of nor-

mative, institutional, strategic, and financial instruments has been established at the European level to support this segment of the defense industry. For example, the European Defence Agency was established in 2004, the European Defence Research Programme was adopted and launched in 2006, and the European Defence Fund—serving as a financial instrument—was created in 2017. Finally, in March 2024, the key strategic framework in this area was presented: the European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS) (European Commission, 2024), whose implementation is carried out through three-year operational programs. At present, the European Commission has submitted a regulation defining the European Defence Industry Programme 2025–2027, which provides 1.5 billion euros in the form of grants to achieve the Strategy's objectives. Undoubtedly, two key factors influenced the development of this strategic framework at the EU level and the decision to make the European defense industry more suitable for operating under wartime economic conditions (Gray, 2024): the conflict in Ukraine and the alleged security threat to Europe posed by the Russian Federation, including the renewed fears regarding potential changes in US policy toward Europe's defense in the context of the upcoming American presidential elections. In other words, by adopting the strategic framework and creating the accompanying infrastructure for the accelerated development of the military and industrial complex, European countries have expressed their intention to take firmer control over their own security. Nevertheless, the Ukrainian conflict and the inability of most European countries to fulfil their commitments regarding the supply of arms and military equipment to the Ukrainian army significantly exposed the systemic weaknesses of European defense industry and insufficient production capacities to meet both national needs and generate export-oriented surpluses (Dempsey, 2023; McLeary, 2024; Witney, 2024). Data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute indicate that European countries were ill-prepared for the outbreak of the Ukrainian conflict. For example, among the world's 100 largest defense companies in 2022, more than 40 were American, 15 Chinese, and 10 Russian, while the share of European companies was negligible, consisting mostly of several Italian, German, and Swedish manufacturers primarily engaged in producing dual-use equipment (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2024). In 2023, under the influence of the Ukrainian conflict, almost all European countries increased their defense spending. However, to understand European strategic autonomy, even in its highly relativized form, it should be pointed out that the US still accounts for 68% of total defense spending within NATO, with Turkey and Canada contributing a combined 4%, while the remaining share is attributable to European countries (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2024). Therefore, if European countries genuinely aspire to strategic security autonomy embodied in some form of a "European pillar within NATO," it is essential that they establish, as soon as possible, an appropriate balance between transatlantic partners by raising Europe's share of spending to 50% of the Alliance's total defense spending.

CONCLUSION

Despite its documentary establishment and its significance for understanding the broader question of European security, the concept of European strategic autonomy is still in its infancy. Unlike some earlier initiatives, which aimed to establish structures through which (Western) Europe would assume full responsibility for its own security, today's understanding of European strategic autonomy is highly relativized and reduced to the need to strengthen Europe's security identity within NATO, as part of the broader Euro-Atlantic military-security umbrella. The underdevelopment of European strategic autonomy is the result of a number of factors, above all the failure to meet the basic prerequisites for its functional verification. These prerequisites, taking into account their nature and characteristics, even though they are deeply intertwined, may be grouped into three main categories: political and institutional, organizational and functional, and material or resource-based. The underdevelopment of European strategic autonomy is the result of a number of factors, above all the failure to meet the basic prerequisites for its functional verification. Taking into account their nature and characteristics, even though they are deeply intertwined, these prerequisites may be grouped into three main categories: political and institutional, organizational and functional, and material or resource- based.

Within the political and institutional prerequisites of European strategic security autonomy, several key problems can be identified; they include existing treaty-based, that is, systemic arrangements governing the processes of EU policy development and implementation in the field of security and defense, as well as the distinctly limiting "American factor," namely the decades-long influence of U.S. policy in shaping all European security initiatives in such a way that, should they ever be realized, they would not jeopardize the interests of the transatlantic partner nor the status and role of NATO in the defense of the European continent.

Regarding organizational and functional prerequisites, although significant progress has been made in developing the CSDP over the past two decades, the European Union still lacks the capacities necessary to independently project its security interests at the regional and global levels. Consequently, relying on external capacities in conducting military and security activities and the existing arrangements that enable such reliance not only makes the European Union highly vulnerable but also substantially undermines its role and credibility as an actor capable of assuming responsibility for its own security or that of its immediate neighborhood.

As demonstrated by the experience of the Ukrainian conflict, for example, the decades-long complacency of most European countries and their dependence on the US, that is, NATO, for the defense of the European continent have also contributed to the underdevelopment of the European military and industrial sector. This sector constitutes an essential resource base without which

Europe, institutionally embodied in the European Union, cannot manifest itself as a *relevant military and security actor*.

NOTES

1 Although the term "European strategic autonomy" is broader than "European strategic security autonomy," given that the subject of this research relates to issues of European security and the security policies of the European Union, these terms are used interchangeably and are similar in meaning.

2 Many substantive elements of the "Berlin Plus arrangements" are provided for in the EU–NATO Joint Declaration on European Security and Defence Policy (following the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty – the Common Security and Defence Policy) of December 2002.

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