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EU strategic autonomy

Introduction

The term strategic autonomy has evolved over time in the European context. It was first used mainly in the context of defence and security policy. The 2016 Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy identifies strategic autonomy as important for Europe's ability to promote peace and security within and beyond its borders. Gradually, this concept has spread to other areas. The definition in the New Industrial Strategy for Europe, published by the Commission in March 2020, serves as an example of what this term can include. In this document, the Commission defines strategic autonomy as follows: *"Europe's strategic autonomy is about reducing dependence on others for things we need the most: critical materials and technologies, food, infrastructure, security and other strategic areas. They also provide Europe's industry with an opportunity to develop its own markets, products and services which boost competitiveness."*

Strategic autonomy is also often mentioned in the Commission's strategic documents. The 2021 Strategic Foresight Report identifies ten strategic areas where the European Union could strengthen its open strategic autonomy and global leadership. The report defines these areas as follows:

- ensuring sustainable and resilient health and food systems;
- securing decarbonised and affordable energy;
- strengthening capacity in data management, artificial intelligence and cutting edge technologies;
- securing and diversifying supply of critical raw materials;
- ensuring first-mover global position in standard-setting;
- building a resilience and future-proof economics and financial systems;
- developing and retaining skills and talent matching EU ambitions;
- strengthening security and defence capacities and access to space;
- working with global partners to promote peace, security and prosperity for all;
- strengthening the resilience of institutions.

Strategic autonomy is also mentioned in the latest 2022 Strategic Foresight Report, which addresses twinning the green and digital transition in the new geopolitical context. This report highlights the importance of strengthening the EU's resilience and open strategic autonomy in sectors relevant to the twin transitions.

Strategic autonomy is also referred to in a number of Commission Communications setting out the Commission's plans in various areas of competence. For example, the Commission Communication entitled Trade Policy Review: An Open, Sustainable and Assertive Trade Policy from February 2021 underlines the importance of open strategic autonomy in trade policy. Furthermore, the Commission Communication entitled The European economic and financial system: fostering openness, strength and resilience of January 2021 sets out how the EU can reinforce its open strategic autonomy in the macro-economic and financial fields. The Commission also

stresses the importance of open strategic autonomy in its May 2021 Communication entitled [Updating the 2020 New Industrial Strategy: Building a stronger Single Market for Europe's recovery](#).

Strategic autonomy and the Russian attack on Ukraine

Strategic autonomy became very topical after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February this year. On 10 and 11 March 2022, EU Heads of State or Government adopted the [Versailles Declaration](#) on Russian aggression against Ukraine. Although the term strategic autonomy is not directly used in this declaration, the Member States stated that they have decided to take more responsibility for their security and take further decisive steps towards building European sovereignty and reducing dependencies. According to the declaration, Member States want to focus on three key dimensions – bolstering defence capabilities; reducing energy dependencies; and building a more robust economic base. In the area of building a more robust economic base, the Member States declare a plan focused on reducing strategic dependencies, for example in critical raw materials, semi-conductors or medicines.

The consequences of the Russian aggression in Ukraine were subsequently addressed by the European Council in its [conclusions](#) of the meeting held on 24 and 25 March 2022, which affirmed the need to phase out the European Union's dependence on Russian gas, oil and coal imports as soon as possible. At the same time, the European Council endorsed the [Strategic Compass](#), which aims to strengthen the EU's strategic autonomy.

In response to the Versailles Declaration, the Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy issued a [Joint Communication](#) analysing the defence investment gaps. In the field of energy, the European Commission has presented the [REPowerEU Plan](#), a series of measures to ensure a rapid reduction of the EU's dependence on Russian fossil fuels. This is to be achieved by saving energy, diversifying supplies, quickly substituting fossil fuels by accelerating Europe's clean energy transition and smartly combining investments and reforms.

Strategic autonomy in the future

The events of recent years, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the Russian aggression in Ukraine, have exposed Europe's vulnerability to external shocks. The [Strategic Compass for Security and Defence](#), which was endorsed by the Foreign Affairs Council in March 2022, starts by pointing out that we are living in an era of strategic competition and complex security threats, and it is therefore necessary for the EU to take more responsibility for its own security. The Strategic Compass contains a roadmap for strengthening EU security and defence policy until 2030. It mentions concrete priority actions in four work strands. The first area concerns action and the ability to act rapidly and robustly whenever a crisis erupts. Another area is security, where the EU should enhance its ability to anticipate threats, guarantee secure access to strategic domains and protect its citizens. Another area focuses on the need to invest more and better in capabilities and innovative technologies, fill strategic gaps and reduce technological and industrial dependencies. The last area is about strengthening cooperation with partners, for example by reinforcing the strategic partnership with NATO or boosting cooperation with bilateral partners that share the same values and interests such as United States, Norway, Canada, UK and Japan.

Events in recent years have also revealed the fragility of global supply chains. In the [2022 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen](#), the President of the European Commission stressed the need to increase the EU's autonomy in the area of critical raw materials. Therefore, she announced [European Critical Raw Materials Act](#) initiative and pointed out that the EU is already seeking greater autonomy in the production of batteries or chips. She also announced that she would push to create a new [European Sovereignty Fund](#) to support important projects of common European interest.

Strategic autonomy increases the Union's ability to act independently, regardless of the interests and demands of other countries, which is extremely important in the current geopolitical landscape. Complete independence
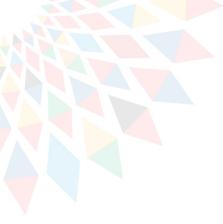
of the European Union from other countries would entail huge financial costs and is almost impossible given the interconnected nature of today's world. Therefore, when discussing strategic autonomy, it is necessary to consider to what extent it is possible and beneficial for the EU to pursue strategic autonomy in particular areas and how to cooperate in the pursuit of strategic autonomy with countries that share similar interests and values with the EU.

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