

Anna Molnár

THE CONCEPTS OF EUROPEAN STRATEGIC AUTONOMY AND EUROPEAN SOVEREIGNTY

INTRODUCTION

Since the unprovoked Russian aggression in Ukraine and, as a consequence of that, the return of realpolitik in Europe, the EU has had to adapt to the changing security environment. It has become evident that economic power alone is not enough to shape international relations. Over the past decade, the discussions about European security have moved towards military related issues, with more and more reference to strategic autonomy, European sovereignty and the creation of the European Defence Union in relation to crisis management tools. The latest developments in the international system have incited the EU to focus on the realisation of the defence internal market launching new regulations and financial tools for boosting defence industry and capability development.

It is not obvious for the EU to transform from a peace project to a defence and security community. The idea of the European integration project was built on the visionary objectives of peace and prosperity. Following the failed attempts to create the European Defence Community and the European Political Community during the 1950s, the issue of defence cooperation practically disappeared from the agenda of the development of European integration until the 1990s. The signatories of the Treaties of Rome, which aimed to create primarily an economic integration and did not mention European foreign, security or defence policy, virtually recognised that the security of Western Europe in the post-World War II era was guaranteed by the United States of America through NATO. The transatlantic relationship became a cornerstone for European security.

The Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) was created by the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. In the absence of EU instruments for crisis management and intervention, the wars in the former Yugoslavia highlighted the deficiencies of the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the need to further integrate and Europeanise it. The war in Ukraine gave new impetus to the additional development of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) launched in 1999 (BERGMANN–MÜLLER 2021). While the Franco–British St. Malo Declaration

in 1998 emphasised the need of the EU's ability to act autonomously (CVCE 1998), the Franco–German declaration in 2023, on the sixtieth anniversary of the Élysée Treaty, emphasised Europe's strategic sovereignty, digital sovereignty and highlighted the strengthening of European defence (Élysée 2023).

Over the last decade, during the Juncker and the von der Leyen commissions, the role of the European Commission in the field of European defence industrial issues has grown steadily, even though the amendment of the EU's treaties has not happened, and the EU's institutional system has not changed. It is no coincidence that one of Ursula von der Leyen's six priorities for the next European Commission as a candidate for a second mandate between 2024 and 2029 was the strengthening of the competitiveness of the European defence industry and thus the creation of the European Defence Union (VON DER LEYEN 2024a).

The concepts of the European Defence Union, strategic autonomy, open strategic autonomy, European sovereignty or strategic sovereignty have nowadays become key issues of the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy. Although these terms have been traditionally used in relation to the functioning of states, nowadays they often appear in connection with the supranational institutional system of the European Union (CSERNATONI 2022; MICHAELS–SUS 2024; ROCH–OLEART 2024). It is no coincidence, since the EU – as a result of its unusual development – is no longer a traditional international organisation with intergovernmental characteristics, it can be considered a kind of *sui generis* international actor. However, the EU cannot be marked as autonomous or sovereign in the field of defence, nor has the area of security and defence become a truly common policy. There is no political will to create a European army, as this would require a real constitutional reform, supranational and federal system at the EU level. Despite the fact that, within the EU, the control of the armed forces is a matter of purely national competence, the slow integration of this policy area has started.

In addition to the EU's economic power, there have been calls in recent years for the EU to become a military power, i.e. to be able to act independently in a crisis management situation. At present, the EU is a political community that is militarily dependent on the hard power of the United States through NATO. As a result, its ability to act autonomously is partially limited. Since in Europe only the United Kingdom and France have full-spectrum military capabilities, and other European states have only limited national self-defence capabilities, most of them need to be members of a military alliance. Since 1949, NATO, which now has 32 members, has provided this protective umbrella. While with the U.K.'s decision to leave the EU, the EU has fewer capabilities, this choice has also provided a window of opportunity for strengthening European defence (MOLNÁR–HORVÁTH s. a.).

THE CONCEPTS OF EUROPEAN STRATEGIC AUTONOMY AND EUROPEAN SOVEREIGNTY IN THE LITERATURE

The EU's strategic autonomy can be interpreted as a partial capacity to act; it is a core element of European sovereignty, which in a broader sense means the capacity to act on its own, and to determine its destiny in the fields of economy, security and technological development by more European financial investment and legislative power. It is important to emphasise that nowadays these concepts are used not only in relation to defence, but above all referring to the fields of economy, digitalisation and technological innovation. Hellendoorn argues that "financial trends are closely linked to questions of national security and geopolitics. They are implicated in the erosion of the Atlantic order and the fragility of Western societies, and in the strategic challenges being faced by Europe in particular" (HELLENDORRN 2025: 99).

Although, of the concepts of autonomy and sovereignty, the latter is the most controversial in relation to the European Union, even the issue of strategic autonomy has raised concerns and the need to clarify the relationship with NATO (BORRELL 2020). The concept of European sovereignty can be interpreted more broadly, which has led to legal and constitutional disputes (BIFULCO–NATO 2020: 25–28; ROCH–OLEART 2024).

The question of sovereignty is more complex, because it is one of the fundamental principles of international law. The concept of state sovereignty was created by the Peace of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Years' War in 1648. In case of states, sovereignty means self-determination and full control over autonomous actions, i.e. the state exercises supreme authority over its own territory and population. *De jure* sovereignty means the legitimacy of power (that is, consent of the people, the right to exercise power), and *de facto* sovereignty means the possession of power, the real ability to act. The concept of sovereignty corresponds to a legal status (*de jure* sovereignty), i.e. real legislative power over political processes. And autonomy means the actual situation (*de facto* sovereignty), i.e. the ability to implement policy decisions. Thus, a state can be sovereign in the legal sense even without being actually strategically autonomous, i.e. truly capable of action (HELD 1990).

To date, a very large body of literature has dealt with the concepts of "strategic autonomy" and "sovereignty" in relation to the European Union. Some of the literature on the subject has drawn attention to the overly broad and symbolic meaning of these concepts, while others have highlighted the problems related to the feasibility of the concepts in the context of transatlantic relations (OLSEN 2022; CAMPORINI et al. 2017; BRUSTLEIN 2018). Brustlein emphasised that the concept of the EU's strategic autonomy could raise concerns among European partners, as it

may remind them of a Gaullist turn, the weakening of transatlantic relations and the strengthening of French influence (BRUSTLEIN 2018: 2). Lippert et al. have extended the concept of strategic autonomy beyond defence to economy, energy supply and the Eurozone (LIPPERT et al. 2019). Grevi identified economy, technology, and security and defence as the main areas for European strategic autonomy (GREVI 2019). Franke and Varma define it as a concept aimed at promoting a stronger, more independent EU at a time of increasing geopolitical competition (FRANKE–VARMA 2019). In their 2020 opinion article, Josep Borrell and Thierry Breton already emphasised the need for autonomy and sovereignty in relation to the supply chain crisis experienced during the pandemic (BORRELL–BRETON 2020). In 2021, following the withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan, the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, underlined the link between European strategic autonomy and European values (GRESSANI–MICHEL 2021), as it should be developed in accordance with European principles and values. We have to emphasise that European sovereignty does not contradict national sovereignty as it boosts the capacity to manage the future of the EU's Member States and address common challenges. According to the priorities of the European Council, the EU will assist a more sovereign Europe (European Council 2024: 2).

It is important to note that the two terms are often used interchangeably, and their meanings overlap, but there are different meanings of “strategic autonomy” and “strategic sovereignty”. According to Fiott “strategic sovereignty” may sound more positive because it emphasises what the EU can do, while “autonomy” refers to independence from others. On the other hand, sovereignty is more closely related to the concept of national sovereignty, with which most people identify it, rather than with European sovereignty (FIOTT 2021; European Parliament 2022; MOLNÁR – JAKUSNÉ HARNOS 2024).

According to Brack et al. there are two opposing interpretations of sovereignty:

“One is the state-centred and puts forward that sovereignty is located at one particular level of power, the parliament and government emanating from it. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the post-sovereigntist understanding conceives the concept in a multi-level approach. It imagines sovereignty through new lenses, arguing from the outset that the concept itself has become outdated, being challenged by globalisation and integration” (BRACK et al. 2019: 6).

Although there is no reference to the exercise of sovereignty at European level in the founding and amending treaties of the EU, and even the Court of Justice of the EU does not refer to it, there are perceptions that point to shared sovereignty at

the European level and to some extent of limited sovereignty at the national level (WALLACE 1999; BRACK et al. 2019; BIFULCO–NATO 2020; ROCH–OLEART 2024: 548–549). The classical approach to international law largely rejects the idea that there could be any real legislative transfer or (constitutional) pluralism between the different levels of decision-making in the EU, since the EU’s legislative powers are merely transferred, emanating from the will of the states. According to the classical view, sovereignty is not derivative, but original, and true sovereignty is not possible without a federal structure. According to another approach, the concept of supremacy actually refers to the sovereignty of the EU. Although supremacy is obviously different from sovereignty, the primacy of EU law over national law affects the question of sovereignty (BIFULCO–NATO 2020; WALKER 2013; MOLNÁR – JAKUSNÉ HARNOS 2024).

According to the post-sovereigntist approach, the EU is able to take legislative decisions and implement its policies on behalf of the EU as a whole in the areas within its competence. This essentially includes the autonomy of the EU as a legally unified entity with exclusive competencies in certain areas both externally and internally. While the concept of supranational sovereignty remains a political taboo, the idea of “European sovereignty” has recently been embraced by French President Emmanuel Macron, particularly in relation to trade, immigration or security issues. Csernatoní underlines that the EU-level communication related to “strategic autonomy” and “sovereignty” shapes collective thinking for EU-level policy formation in various policy areas. Csernatoní argues that the broad and still not fully defined meaning of these terms helps to create a more unified image of the European Union as a strategically independent and technologically sovereign actor (CSERNATONI 2022: 395–396; MOLNÁR – JAKUSNÉ HARNOS 2024).

THE CONCEPTS IN EU OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS AND SPEECHES

The CSDP has developed only since the late 1990s after the disappointing and devastating experience of the Yugoslav wars when the EU was not able to intervene on its own and stop the war. European leaders launched the integration process of European defence, overcoming the taboo of closer defence cooperation that had developed after the failure of the European Defence Community in 1954 (DE VASCONCELOS 2009). It is no coincidence that the wars in Yugoslavia became a driving force for closer cooperation. The milestone in this process was the St. Malo Declaration by France and the United Kingdom in 1998, which emphasised

the need for the EU to have the capacity to take autonomous actions. In the early 2000s, the legal background and the decision-making structures for security and defence policy were developed, and consequently the EU launched its first CSDP missions and operations (MOLNÁR – JAKUSNÉ HARNOS 2023).

The European security strategy of 2003 recommended the creation of a strategic culture that “fosters early, rapid, and when necessary, robust intervention” (Council of the European Union 2003: 13). The term of strategic autonomy was first officially mentioned in the conclusions of the 2013 European Council. Since the Lisbon Treaty (2009), defence policy was discussed for the first time at the level of heads of state and government in 2013. The document considered the strengthening of the European defence industry and the development of defence capabilities the main conditions for strategic autonomy and for the ability to act with partners (European Council 2013).

In 2016, the EU’s global strategy emphasised the development of European defence capabilities, the promotion of strategic autonomy and the strengthening of the EU as a security community (European External Action Service 2016a: 14–20). This issue has already become one of the key messages of many official documents and speeches at Member State and EU levels. In the Council conclusions of November 2016, the concept of strategic autonomy was defined more precisely: “To act autonomously when and where necessary and with partners wherever possible” (Council of the European Union 2016: 2).

Since 2016, following the adoption of the EU global strategy and the Brexit referendum, the integration process in the area of the EU CSDP has accelerated. For both the U.K. and the European Union, the U.K.’s exit from the EU brought profound changes (European Movement International 2023). It is important to stress that more defence-related initiatives have been implemented after the Global Strategy than in the previous two decades. Although the realisation of the European army is not on the agenda, there are more and more discussions about the realisation of the European Defence Union and strategic autonomy, and many initiatives have been launched not only to strengthen European defence capabilities (the Permanent Structured Cooperation [PESCO], the Coordinated Annual Defence Review [CARD], the European Defence Fund [EDF] and the Military Planning and Conduct Capabilities [MPCC], the European Peace Facility [EPF], the development of Rapid Deployment Capacity [RDC] and regulations on Common Procurement), but also to brake long-lasting taboos of European defence. However, none of these initiatives fully lived up to the initial high expectations in terms of their scale and ambition, and the implementation of strategic autonomy has been subject to criticisms (MOLNÁR 2022; CAMPORINI et al. 2017).

One of the taboo-breaking decisions was the creation of the EDF, which made it possible to spend EU budget on defence industry, thus on armaments (RODRIGUES 2023: 1154). According to Article 41.2 of the Treaty on the European Union “expenditure arising from operations having military or defence implications” cannot be financed by the EU budget. The establishment of the EDF is based on the EU’s competence to support the competitiveness of the European industry and research, and not on competences in the framework of CFSP and CSDP. The legal basis for establishing the EDF was Articles 173 and 182 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) to support competitiveness of European industry. According to Vroege, having chosen this legal basis has led to criticism (VROEGE 2023). In 2018, the second implementation report of the Global Strategy emphasised the importance of the European Commission’s proposition to establish the European Defence Fund in enhancing strategic autonomy (European External Action Service 2018: 7). The third implementation report of the EU GS stated that the solid foundations for a European Security and Defence Union and European strategic autonomy have been set during the previous three years. The document recommended to further develop 1. the intelligence support to decision-making; 2. the common strategic culture; 3. interoperability; 4. the command and control structures; 5. defence cooperation to retain and develop Member States’ single set of forces; 6. technology and cyber (European External Action Service 2019: 12).

The 2018 State of the Union address of the President of the European Commission highlighted that due to the geopolitical situation, the moment of European sovereignty had come. Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the Commission stated that it was time for Europe to take its destiny into its own hands and to play a role, as a Union, in shaping global affairs as a more sovereign actor in international relations. According to his vision, European sovereignty is born of Member States’ national sovereignty and does not replace it. Sharing sovereignty makes them stronger. He also emphasised that this process does not mean the militarisation of the European Union; it means becoming more autonomous and living up to the EU’s global responsibilities (JUNCKER 2018).

In 2019, the new President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen declared to lead a ‘geopolitical Commission’ during her presidency and Josep Borrell, the new High Representative of the Union (HR/VP), said that the EU must “learn the language of power” (FIOTT 2020). The necessity to create strategic autonomy and technological sovereignty was emphasised in the Strategic Compass adopted by the Council in 2022 (Council of the European Union 2022). Although the 2016 Council Conclusions already provided definitional guidelines, the official definition of the concept of strategic autonomy has not yet been developed at the EU level.

The concept can be summarised as the ability of the EU to ensure its own security and act autonomously on land, in the air, at sea, in space and in cyberspace. It must also be able to project power, effectively respond to external crises, and finally, take independent decisions in the field of defence policy (BISCOP 2017; VARGA 2017; BISCOP 2018a; FIOTT 2018; DE SUTTER 2020: 14; MEYER et al. 2020). Member States have different interests and positions on the concept (VON WEITERSHAUSEN et al. 2020; GRÜLL–LAWTON 2020; RECCHIA 2020; SILVA–SELDEN 2020). Today this concept has an extended meaning, additionally including economic, technological and energy policies. Spain with the Netherlands published a non-paper on ESA arguing that it is important to combine an open economy with the reduction of some strategic dependencies in order to avoid protectionism. The document promotes the idea of open strategic autonomy (OSA) (Government of the Netherlands 2023). In 2023, the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the EU prepared a non-paper in close consultation with the 27 Member States and the EU institutions in order to contribute to the development of “a comprehensive, balanced and forward-looking approach to ensure the EU’s Open Strategic Autonomy and global leadership by 2030” (Spanish Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2023). The Spanish presidency identified OSA as a tool for reindustrialisation of Europe and not as a tool exclusively for CSDP (ORŁOWSKI 2023). Open Strategic Autonomy aims to guarantee that

“the EU has the capacity to cope alone if necessary but without ruling out cooperation whenever possible. It goes some steps beyond smart supply chain management by taking into account geopolitics as well as economic factors. It relies on foresight to identify threats and ensures resilience by anticipating the required responses” (European Parliament 2023a; MOLNÁR 2024).

EUROPEAN SOVEREIGNTY

It would be very difficult to examine these concepts without mentioning the French President Emmanuel Macron who has become one of the most important proponents of strategic autonomy and European sovereignty. In September 2017, Macron’s speech at the Sorbonne described the autonomy debate in the context of the rise of “nationalism, identitarianism, protectionism and isolationist sovereignty”. Instead of “strategic autonomy”, the French president used the terms of autonomous operating capability and European sovereignty in a general sense in the field of defence. In his view, there are six key elements for realising European sovereignty:

1. security and defence; 2. control of borders; 3. partnership with Africa; 4. ecological transition; 5. digital technology; and 6. industrial and monetary economic power (MACRON 2017; European Parliament 2022).

In 2018, during his speech at an ambassadors' conference, Macron highlighted the need to build strategic autonomy at the European level. He explained this by drawing a comparison with the United States or China, as the EU cannot be considered a power with strategic autonomy (MACRON 2018). In recent years, the French president has emphasised the need to strengthen the EU's foreign, security and defence policy in order to protect European civilisation and the liberal world order (STAUNTON 2022).

In April 2024, Macron's speech at the Sorbonne focused again on the concept of European sovereignty, remarkably, he mentioned it 21 times. He proposed "to build a more united, more sovereign and more democratic Europe". He stated that the concept of European sovereignty "seemed very French" and "has gradually taken route across Europe". In his views, the strengthening of European sovereignty was essentially due to six important steps during the previous years. First, the introduction of common debt in order to finance the Recovery and Resilience Facility was a choice of the united Europe. He quoted Chancellor Scholz, who called that decision a "Hamiltonian moment". Second, EU Member States were able to prove strategic unity concerning policy areas belonging to national competence, such as in the field of health, energy policy and defence in times of crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian aggression in Ukraine. Third, the EU members began to prepare the conditions to realise technological and industrial sovereignty. He highlighted that strategic autonomy "was the choice to end strategic dependencies in key sectors, from semiconductors to critical raw materials". He called it "strategy of autonomy". Fourth, the introduction of the Green Deal and adoption of legislation regarding digital and energy transition can be considered fundamental choices. Fifth, the renewing consideration of geographic neighbourhood means the new enlargement policy towards Eastern Europe and the launch of the European Political Community. Macron gives a definition of European sovereignty:

"But what does it mean to be sovereign in this changing world? What does sovereign mean when I am telling you that Europe might die? It means that we must rise to the three challenges of our time, to this acceleration of history and its dramatization. Hence the solution lies in our ability – because the rules of the game have changed regarding each of these points – to make huge strategic decisions, to embrace paradigm shifts, and to address them with strength, prosperity and humanism. And it is these three points I would like to speak about today. I think that it is with strength,

prosperity and humanism that we give substance, if you will, to this European sovereignty and enable Europe to be a continent that will not disappear, a political project that holds its ground in this world and at this time when it is being threatened more than ever.

It's simple, a power Europe is a Europe that commands respect and ensures its security. It is a Europe that recognises that it has borders and protects them. It is a Europe that sees the risks to which it is exposed and prepares for them. To achieve this, we must break out from some kind of strategic guardianship. Why? Because implicitly, we were designed that way. After the Second World War, many European countries agreed – as was often imposed on them – to delegate their security to others because we did not want them to rearm too quickly. And, as I said earlier, we have to a certain extent delegate everything that is strategic in our world: our energy to Russia, our security – not in the case of France, but several of our partners – to the United States and equally critical prospects to China. We need to take them back. That is what strategic autonomy is all about.”

Macron explains that strategic autonomy means to take back control over energy from Russia, over security from the USA and control over prosperity and industry from China. In order to reach strategic autonomy he proposes three main actions (strength, prosperity and humanism): firstly, further integration in the field of defence, and effective protection of borders, secondly, to build a new growth and production model and thirdly, to promote humanism and European values. Scaling up defence means increasing defence capabilities, the creation of “genuine strategic cohesion” between European armed forces, “launching a second stage of the European Intervention Initiative” e.g. “through the creation of a European Military Academy, to train future European military and civil leaders to deal with security and defence issues”, and the effective implementation of the strategic compass, use of European debt and investment to finance the development of defence industry and a more effective control over European borders. He also stressed that this means the building of the “European pillar of NATO”. In his views, the new prosperity pact is based on green transition, digitalisation, simplification of regulations, industrialisation, reform of energy and agriculture policy at EU level, new trade agreements with third countries promoting EU standards (“Made in Europe”), reform of the economic security instruments, promotion of technology and innovation, increase in common borrowing capacity (EU debt). According to Macron, European “means defending a certain idea of humankind that places free, rational, enlightened individuals above all else. It means saying that from Paris to

Warsaw, from Lisbon to Odessa, we have a unique relationship with freedom and justice” (MACRON 2024).

EU AND NATO COOPERATION

When the European Strategic Autonomy is mentioned, most people think about the potential duplication of NATO’s assets by the EU. Although the two organisations share the same values and the majority of their members, the relationship between NATO and the EU has been conflictual one since the creation of the (European) Common Security and Defence Policy: it has been based as much on shared values, interests and common threats as on rivalry. During the Cold War, the roles of NATO and the EU’s predecessor, the European Communities (EC), in the international system were clearly separated: NATO was founded as an organisation and military alliance for collective defence and the European Communities functioned primarily as an organisation for economic and political integration.

As the two organisations have evolved since the 1990s, there has been some convergence in their roles in terms of security and defence responsibilities. Explaining the relationship between NATO and the EU became more important since the late 1990s, when the Western European Union was integrated into the EU and the CSDP became integral part of the CFSP.

During that period, fundamental questions had to be addressed: the future role of NATO and the EU, the possibility of the EU developing its own defence capabilities, and the relationship of the EU to NATO structures. With regard to the future relationship, Madeleine Albright, then U.S. Secretary of State, set out the three *Ds*: no diminution of NATO, no discrimination and no duplication. At a press conference in 1998, she stated:

“There is a reason for the Europeans to find an identity in their own defence, but this is a thing that cannot be a duplication or discrimination. It is a manner by which the Europeans can share in the work of NATO. It is something that cannot hurt NATO because this is the most important alliance. But we think it is very important that the Europeans work in this manner because it is something that helps us in burden sharing” (ALBRIGHT 1998).

NATO has gradually become more open to collective and cooperative security-related tasks, and has begun to play an increasingly important role in crisis management and peacekeeping operations outside its territory. The two organisations have different

instruments for crisis management that complement each other's. Although 24 of the EU's 27 Member States are also members of NATO, this convergence has not necessarily led to an improvement in their relations until 2016, on the contrary, in many cases has even increased competition (MOLNÁR 2019).

Formal cooperation for crisis management between the two organisations was institutionalised by the Berlin Plus Agreement in 2003 in order to avoid potential duplication with NATO and thus the EU had access to NATO's crisis management capabilities (European External Action Service 2016b; MOLNÁR 2018). Long-term cooperation was hampered by the Turkish–Cypriot conflict. Following Cyprus's accession to the EU in 2004, it was no longer possible to launch a new CSDP operation under the Berlin Plus agreement. On the part of NATO, Turkey and on the part of the EU, Cyprus has blocked further cooperation, as Turkey does not recognise Cyprus, and Northern Cyprus is recognised only by Turkey.

As a result of the Treaties' changes, the EU's crisis management structures and the decision-making processes have evolved and the EU has begun to play an important role in international relations. Due to the mutual assistance/defence clause (Article 42.7) introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon, the European Union has been transformed from a certain security community based on cooperative security structures into an international security organisation that also reinforces the collective defence of the Member States. It is no coincidence that the unofficial name of this article changes from time to time, and the terms of 'mutual defence clause' or 'mutual assistance clause' are used as synonyms (European Parliament s. a.; European Parliament 2015). Nowadays, official EU documents and websites prefer to use the term of 'mutual assistance clause'. This avoids potential duplication and emphasises complementarity between the two organisations (MOLNÁR 2019).

Obviously, if an external crisis requires a military response, the question is which organisation Europeans should act through. According to Biscop, neither NATO nor the EU have their own armed forces, so they rely on the pool of their Member States' capabilities (BISOP 2018b). Europe is still dependent on the U.S. for its security, and the EU's ability to project military power is limited. Compared to NATO, the EU has much smaller capabilities: while the EU Military Staff consists of 200 people, NATO can rely on around 7,000 personnel within its command and control structures.

After the accession of Cyprus to the EU, a period of slow evolution or even "frozen" cooperation followed between NATO and the EU; during that period nothing substantial happened and cooperation between the two organisations remained occasional or informal (ΠΑΠΑΙΩΑΝΝΟΥ 2019). Despite the ongoing declarations on

closer cooperation between the European Union and NATO, clear and measurable results had not been achieved until the turning point in 2016 (MOLNÁR 2019).

Recent years have seen an increase in traditional and hybrid threats and the security environment worsened, which have once again acted as an incentive to strengthen the EU in the field of defence, while at the same time, to enhance cooperation with NATO. It is no coincidence that in 2015, a report prepared by Javier Solana, former High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, former NATO Secretary General, identified the realisation of the European Defence Union (EDU) as the ultimate goal of European integration in defence (SOLANA 2015: 6). For NATO, 2014 marked a turning point, as the Alliance began to return to its original collective defence tasks.

Until the Brexit referendum in 2016, there was less and less chance for real improvement between NATO and the EU, whose relationship could still be described as competitive. The British have always been suspicious of the EU's attempts to gain more autonomy in this area. In 2016, the possibility of the U.K. leaving the EU gave a new impetus to strengthening the EU's defence policy and, consequently, the EU–NATO relationship as the strongest military power was leaving the EU. All this would not have been enough on its own, but the deterioration of relations between the West and Russia since 2014, the weakening of multilateral world order, the outcome of the U.S. presidential election, and the changes in the security perceptions of EU Member States all acted as catalysts for enhancing the relationship between the two organisations. NATO and the EU have been forced by the weakening of multilateralism and the rise of new great power politics in the international system to improve their linkage and thereby bolster their current position as international security providers. The implementation of the EU Global Strategy has accelerated this process.

Since 2016, three NATO–EU joint declarations (2016, 2018, 2023) were signed by the representatives of NATO and the EU to enhance the cooperation in seven areas: countering hybrid threats; operational cooperation including maritime and migration issues; cybersecurity and defence; defence capabilities; defence industry and research; exercises; and support for capacity-building efforts and resilience of Western Balkan and Eastern and Southern partners (NATO 2016; Council of the European Union 2023; MOLNÁR 2019).

Since 2016, the cooperation between the EU and NATO has clearly improved, with various formal and informal meetings, information exchanges, joint seminars and training sessions and with the convergence of strategic documents. In the past, the relationship between the two organisations was compared to a Sisyphean task many times: when some success is achieved, all progress is reversed, and

the process is repeated (PAPAIOANNOU 2019). The year 2016 marked a turning point in the history of EU–NATO relations, followed by an acceleration of several events. Significant progress has been made, and staff-to-staff cooperation, reciprocal briefing of the representatives of NATO and the EU have become a daily routine (MOLNÁR 2019). Despite the partial results achieved so far, there is still room for improvement, as at the diplomatic level the PSC–NAC ambassadorial meetings have not been organised since February 2022 due to the conflict between Cyprus and Turkey. At the operational level, effective cooperation between the EU’s Operation Irini and NATO’s Sea Guardian is also hampered by that conflict.

The Russian aggression in Ukraine led to a clarification of the roles of the two organisations, NATO’s collective defence role is undisputed, it is primarily responsible for territorial defence and deterrence, and the EU is playing a decisive role in supporting Ukraine with its comprehensive and integrated crisis management tools (sanctions against Russia and provision of military training, weapons and ammunition). The war in Ukraine has led to a division of labour between the EU and NATO. Implementation reports of the Strategic Compass state that NATO’s core responsibility is collective defence that must be strengthened. The latest report also stated that the European Union can be a “valuable global security partner” through becoming “a strong European pillar within NATO” (European External Action Service 2024: 6).

THE IDEA OF THE EUROPEAN DEFENCE UNION AND THE EUROPEAN DEFENCE INDUSTRY

The idea of the European Security and Defence Union (ESDU) appeared first during the debate on the Constitutional Treaty at the European Convention on the Future of Europe in 2002, when the institutional framework, decision-making processes and the first EU missions and operations were launched in the framework of the newly created policy area the (European) Common Security and Defence Policy. At that time the idea proposed by France and Germany was rejected by the more Atlanticist EU Member States (NOVÁKY 2017). Thus, neither the draft Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe nor the Lisbon Treaty mentioned the creation of the ESDU (*Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe* 2004).

In 2017, the Juncker European Commission’s “Reflection Paper on the Future of European Defence”, mentioned the gradual creation of a European Security and Defence Union (ESDU), which demands a greater alignment of strategic cultures, a common threat analysis, appropriate responses, joint decision-making and action,

and greater financial solidarity at the European level (European Commission 2017). In 2017, in his annual speech on the State of the European Union, Jean-Claude Juncker expressed the need for the EU to become a fully-fledged European Defence Union by 2025 (JUNCKER 2017). Although the definition of the ESDU or EDU is still unclear, the gradual realisation of deeper European defence cooperation began after the adoption of the GS.

Since the appearance of the term of the European strategic autonomy, this concept was closely linked to the idea of the EDU and thus to deficiencies of the European defence industry. The war in Ukraine highlighted the shortcomings and problems resulting from the undersized, fragmented and underfunded European defence industry. Just a few weeks after the Russian invasion, at the informal European Council in Versailles on 11 March 2022, EU Member States expressed their commitment to enhancing the European defence technological and industrial basis and asked the European Commission to continue planning in that policy area (European Council 2022).

The idea of the EDU has also appeared repeatedly in Ursula von der Leyen's speeches. In 2023 she expressed that the EU had started to build the EDU (European Commission 2023). She also stated that, in connection with the realisation of a fully-fledged European Defence Union, the Commission had started to develop a European Defence Industrial Strategy (European Defence Agency 2023a; European Defence Agency 2023b).

The Russian war in Ukraine presented both a major challenge and a window of opportunity for the development of European defence industry. In 2022, the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy expressed several goals in their joint communication entitled "On the Defence Investment Gaps Analysis and Way Forward" (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2022).

In July 2022, the European Commission proposed two legal incentives for the joint procurement of defence products: the adoption of the "European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act" (EDIRPA), and the European Defence Investment Programme (EDIP). Due to the increased demand, the Commission presented on 3 May 2023 a further proposal for the adoption of the regulation establishing the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP). The ASAP regulation was published in July 2023 and the EDIRPA Regulation in autumn 2023 (European Parliament 2023b). In November 2023, the EU defence ministers, meeting in the Steering Board of the European Defence Agency, adopted the EU Capability Development Priorities for 2023. The document provides a basis for

the EU's defence planning process and for all defence initiatives. The military realities observed on the ground in Ukraine are reflected in the 22 priorities (European Defence Agency 2023c).

In March 2024, the European Commission and the High Representative published the EU's first defence industrial strategy, which aims to increase the resilience of European defence industry through collaborative research, investment, production and procurement actions. This strategy provides concrete indicators for the European defence industrial policy. It invites Member States to 1. "procure at least 40% of defence equipment in a collaborative manner by 2030"; 2. "by 2030, the value of intra-EU defence trade represents at least 35% of the value of the EU defence market"; and 3. "to make steady progress towards procuring at least 50% of their defence investments within the EU by 2030 and 60% by 2035" (European Commission 2024: 15).

In July 2024, Ursula von der Leyen emphasised the need to build a true European Defence Union as a candidate for a second mandate as president of the European Commission between 2024 and 2029. She stated that

"Member States will retain responsibility for their national security and their armies. And NATO will remain the pillar of our collective defence. But we all know very well that our spending on defence is too low and ineffective. Our foreign spending is too great. We must therefore create a single market for defence. We must invest more in high-end defence capabilities. In other words, Europe must continue along the path laid down by the Versailles Declaration. We need to invest more. We need to invest together. And we must set up common European projects. For example, a comprehensive aerial defence system – a European Air Shield, not only to protect our airspace but as a strong symbol of European unity in defence matters" (VON DER LEYEN 2024b).

In her program she promised to

"appoint a Commissioner for Defence, who will work closely with the next High Representative – Vice-President in accordance with the Treaty. To frame the new approach and to identify our investment needs we will jointly present a White Paper on the Future of European Defence in the first 100 days of the mandate" (VON DER LEYEN 2024b: 13).

Although the EU has not realised the creation of the European Defence Union, it has made significant steps (BRITZ 2023). The implementation of innovative initiatives (i.e. PESCO, EDF, MPCC, etc.) indicates these efforts.

CONCLUSIONS

The Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2022 can be considered a watershed or game changer for European defence. It had an impact on both capability development and political decisions. The European Union has taken important steps towards achieving the realisation of European Strategic Autonomy and the European Defence Union, despite the existing challenges, criticism and questions surrounding their implementation. Structural barriers, persisting differences in EU Member States' strategic cultures, as well as their relationship with NATO, are likely to continue to constrain the full realisation of the ESA and the EDU.

The reinforced role of the European Commission implies the EU's efforts to play a real security provider in the international system. It is no coincidence that the President of the European Commission has appointed a Commissioner for Defence and Space, and promised to publish a white paper on the future of European defence in the first 100 days of her mandate.

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