



European strategic autonomy: Energy at the heart of European security?

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Abstract

Since Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a radical transformation of the meaning, use and role of the concept of strategic autonomy within the European project. Whereas its application was originally restricted to defence matters, it is now explicitly mentioned in other sectors, including pharmaceuticals. The COVID-19 pandemic and its political, social and economic consequences have considerably boosted the trend to broaden the concept's sphere of application. Strategic autonomy has found new life as a key political concept that will help shape the future of the EU. But does the concept really apply to all sectors? To what extent is European strategic autonomy behind the development of the Energy Union? The article attempts to provide an answer to these questions through an analysis of the theoretical and practical development of the concept, focusing particularly on the debate around Nord Stream 2.

Keywords

European strategic autonomy, European defence sector, Energy Union, European security, Energy security

Introduction

L'Europe n'a jamais existé? Ce n'est pas l'addition de souverainetés réunies dans les Conseils qui crée une entité. Il faut véritablement créer l'Europe, qu'elle se manifeste à elle-même et à l'opinion américaine et qu'elle ait confiance en son propre avenir. (Monnet 1950/1993, 124)

As early as 1950, Jean Monnet spoke of the need for Europe to act autonomously—in the passage just cited, he refers more specifically to Europe's duty of unity against the influence of 'American opinion'. More than 70 years later, Monnet would certainly be

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enthusiastic to see the renewal of the idea of strategic autonomy, a concept that was born in France out of the uncertainty created by the end of the Cold War and which has gradually been Europeanised. However, as its popularity and use grew incrementally, its vagueness exponentially increased and its content was increasingly blurred. This article will therefore attempt to shed light on this concept, and most importantly, on whether it can apply theoretically and practically to European sectors beyond the defence sector, in particular to the Energy Union.

This article will argue that the concept of European strategic autonomy, originally applied specifically to the defence sector, has a wider reach than anticipated and is transferable to the European energy sector, a sector whose strategic stakes and characteristics are similar to those of European defence. First, the concept of European strategic autonomy itself and more particularly its development will be analysed. The individual perspectives of France, the EU and other individual member states will be examined to determine whether a common European definition exists. Second, this article will attempt to demonstrate the applicability of the concept to the Energy Union, more specifically through a case study of Nord Stream 2.

An evolving definition

On 16 March 1950, General Charles de Gaulle mentioned the concept of ‘strategic autonomy’ for the first time during a press interview on the ratification of a bilateral Franco-American agreement: ‘the weaponry is limited, as you know, to weapons that confer no strategic autonomy upon us. But this is a bad thing for us, because after all, the policies do not always overlap, particularly concerning Africa, and even French Africa. It may be unacceptable to us not to be able to do anything by ourselves’ (De Gaulle 1970, 328).

In 1994, 44 years later, the Europeanised concept officially appeared for the first time in the French White Paper on defence (France 1994, 139). This new concept complemented and arguably overshadowed the debate around the politically controversial French concept of *l’Europe puissance* at a time when, at the end of the Cold War, European countries needed to take back control of their own security and autonomy. However, at that time, Europe was not yet developed enough to create the protective umbrella that European countries needed. Therefore, the concept was still grounded in the member states before it was truly Europeanised: French strategic autonomy would not be absolute without European strategic autonomy. Indeed, it is important to note that even in the 1994 White Paper (France 1994), Europe, or the aggregation of member states’ capabilities, had already been prescribed, identifying the Union as the future for French strategic autonomy.

When Jacques Chirac came to power in 1995, he was determined to become independent from an American ally with which disparities were growing. He encouraged the Europeanisation of the French concept through the acknowledgement of a ‘European defence identity within NATO’ (Mauro 2018, 7). In 1997 Tony Blair came to power.

Frustrated by Bill Clinton's reluctance to intervene in Kosovo¹ (Mauro 2018, 7), he joined forces with President Chirac, and the two European leaders took the development of this identity a step further and institutionalised the concept of European strategic autonomy at the St Malo Summit in 1998. For the first time, there was a direct reference to the need for the 'capacity for autonomous decision' (UK Parliament 1998) in the realm of defence, creating the first stepping stones towards the concept of European strategic autonomy through European autonomy of military action. This trend matured in 2019 with the creation of the Intelligence College in Europe (in Paris), which brought to life the concept of European strategic autonomy and linked it directly to European sovereignty (Élysée 2019a). A few months earlier the concept of strategic autonomy had been broadly applied by Emmanuel Macron in his letter to European citizens ahead of the 2019 European Parliamentary elections, in which he affirmed that European strategic interests also include 'environmental standards, data protection and fair payment of taxes' (Élysée 2019a). As Jean-Luc Sauron, an adviser to the French Conseil d'État and specialist in European law, has stated, European strategic autonomy 'est la capacité d'autorité publique à définir de manière non conditionnée la marche opérationnelle des politiques' (Sauron pers. comm. 2020), going far beyond the realm of national sovereignty and the defence sector. Indeed, strategic autonomy, today, can only be European.

It is, however, important to note that the 2016 EU Global Strategy, which does indeed refer directly to the concept of European strategic autonomy, leaves some flexibility when referring to the concept as 'an appropriate level of ambition and strategic autonomy' (European External Action Service 2016, 9), reflecting its continuing controversial nature. Indeed, member states perceive European strategic autonomy differently. While larger states such as France, Poland, Germany and the UK are principally concerned with the political decision-making autonomy that such European strategic autonomy would provide, the Eastern European states are rather more concerned about autonomy of action in terms of military and civilian capabilities. Yet others, such as Austria, Croatia, Estonia and Malta, are more interested in information autonomy around intelligence gathering, data collection and analysis (Franke and Varma 2018, 6). It is also important to note that even though the link to European sovereignty has not been directly established by some member states, there has been a recent shift within the Commission when referring to 'operational sovereignty' (European Commission 2013, 3) towards the French 'rapprochement' of the two concepts of autonomy and sovereignty. Indeed, for Niklas Novaky, EU security and defence policy specialist at the Martens Centre, these two concepts mean 'more or less the same thing' in practice (Novaky pers. comm. 2020). However, there is still too much potential for political backlash due to differing degrees of interpretation of the idea of European strategic autonomy, and the sensitivity of member states and European citizens to the issue of national sovereignty, for the connection to be publicly and directly made.

However, with the current crisis and the new dynamism behind the use of the term 'European strategic autonomy' by both the French president and President of the European Council Charles Michel, the concept will certainly be reviewed and a more ambitious common definition could then be achieved.

European strategic autonomy in the energy sector

The Energy Union

Energy was identified in the EU's Global Strategy of 2016 as a sector in which the Union should become strategically autonomous. Indeed, the high strategic and security value of the European energy sector does not align with the fact that the 'EU and all its member states are net importers of energy' (Lippert 2019, 25). Moreover, the gravity of this non-autonomy is exacerbated by the fact that our energy-source dependencies are concentrated on just a few suppliers, in particular Russia for 30% of our crude oil and 40% of our natural gas imports (Eurostat 2020). Such asymmetric dependencies in such a strategic sector as energy create a potentially damaging situation for our European strategic autonomy, weakening our capacity to freely take political decisions and act on them.

However, when speaking of European strategic autonomy, Klaus-Dieter Borchardt, deputy director general of the EU's Directorate-General for Energy, argues that since 'we are heavily dependent on energy imports, we cannot say that autonomy is a goal in itself', but that 'the Energy Union strategy is rather to ensure the security of supply through the diversification of energy sources' (Borchardt pers. comm. 2020). In his remarks, the deputy director general explains that the concept as it is perceived in the defence sector, as a driver of increased autonomy, cannot be directly applied to the Energy Union. This is further supported by Jaroslaw Pietras, former director general of the Directorate-General for Transport, Energy, Environment and Education of the Council Secretariat, who states that, 'in the energy sector, it is not so much about autonomy but rather diversification'. He also noted that

of course it helps going towards a certain autonomy through the non-overreliance on some sources of energy, therefore increasing our immunity to external interference . . . but as the economic concept of 'contestable suppliers' demonstrates, if the dominant supplier sees its limited capacity to affect consumers by a change in supply because the consumer has other choices, then it cannot abuse its monopolistic positions. (Pietras pers. comm. 2020)

However, further analysis of the remarks by these senior EU officials shows that the concept of European strategic autonomy, or at least its essence, plays a structuring role in the European strategy for the energy sector. Indeed, it could be argued that the goal of decreasing the EU's energy-supplier dependencies is itself testimony to the presence of the concept as the underlying idea behind the diversification strategy, which aims to ensure the security of supply of energy in the EU and, thus, energy security. Indeed, being able to switch energy providers to stop the potential influence of a dominant energy supplier is similar to the main goal of European strategic autonomy: to have freedom of political choice, and action.

The Nord Stream 2 project

In June 2017 the US Senate adopted a bill lobbying for the establishment of sanctions on companies working on the Nord Stream 2 project (Russell 2017, 2). At that time,

Germany and Austria were the most vocal in denouncing this ‘unacceptable interference in European Energy matters, motivated by the desire to ensure US energy sector jobs by promoting US LNG [liquefied natural gas] at the expense of Russian gas’ (Russell 2017, 2). In December 2019 US President Donald Trump approved the sanctions recommended by the Senate on any firm that ‘helps the state-owned gas company Gazprom finish’ the project (*BBC News* 2019), therefore threatening the European companies OMV (Austria), Wintershall and Uniper (Germany), and ENGIE (France). This interference in the member states’ sovereignty and freedom of choice in their energy supply, as well as the business activities of European companies, can be interpreted as unwanted external influence in European affairs.

In fact, the EU has already identified such American legislative extraterritoriality as a threat to the autonomy of the Union. It has reacted by creating a Council regulation to protect against the effects of the extraterritorial application of legislation adopted by a third country (Council of the European Union 1996). Despite this, Raphaël Gauvain, deputy in the French National Assembly and rapporteur on the situation, argues that ‘le niveau pertinent ici n’est pas la Commission. Pour agir avec des souverainetés partagées, et pour identifier les intérêts stratégiques européens, c’est au Conseil européen, aux États membres de donner l’impulsion politique’ (Gauvain pers. comm. 2020). The Commission’s current silence and inaction stands in sharp contrast to its behaviour in 1996, and shows that there has been a change of approach to one of prudence in its use and definition of the term ‘European strategic autonomy’.

On the other hand, the US ambassador to Berlin defended the US’s stance towards the Nord Stream 2 project as being ‘extremely pro-European’ (*Financial Times* 2019) rather than a threat to the Union’s autonomy, in that it would help Germany avoid becoming a ‘hostage of Russia’ (*Deutsche Welle* 2019). When assessing the impact of such a project on European energy security, and therefore the strategic autonomy of the European energy sector, some argue that Nord Stream 2 would be of benefit by ‘ending the dependence on the unreliable Ukrainian transit route’ (Nord Stream 2, 2020) and by securing a reliable flow of cheap gas to Europe as ‘Middle Eastern and North African suppliers lack sufficient export capacity’ (Nord Stream 2, 2020). It is further claimed that, thanks to technology, European member states can now reverse the flow of energy without difficulty, enabling them to ‘easily share gas with one another, ending their dependence on a single supply route’ (Russell 2017, 2). And this being the case, the argument goes, the new Nord Stream 2 route would not pose any threat to European energy security. This was notably demonstrated in 2014, when Russia threatened to turn off the taps on the Ukraine route; Ukraine was able to secure the supply by buying Russian gas through Slovakia (Russell 2017, 2). Others argue the opposite, that Nord Stream 2 is not beneficial, as the project ‘does not help the EU’s diversification efforts; on the contrary, it concentrates most Russian exports on a single route, while potentially ending the transit via Ukraine’ (Russell 2017, 2). This in itself constitutes another threat to European strategic autonomy by destabilising the European neighbourhood. Moreover, a situation where one energy supplier has a monopoly on the market could be extremely damaging due to the high strategic value of knowledge of the energy system. As Michel Derdevet,

former secretary general of ENEDIS argues, 'les réseaux énergétiques ne sont pas que de l'énergie, ils contiennent une information stratégiquement sensible pour les pays; les datas' (Derdevet pers. comm. 2020).

Conclusion

Over the years the concept of European strategic autonomy has slowly moved from being a controversial political concept relating generally to defence to a more consensual, Europeanised and generalised concept which seems today to be shaping the European strategy for after the COVID-19 crisis. Going beyond this analysis, the article has demonstrated that through its application to the energy sector, the scope of the concept has become much broader. In this sector we find the same objectives of independence of political decisions and actions, giving the energy sector a similar strategic value to that of the defence sector.

However, the economic consequences of the COVID-19 crisis and the inability of European member states to clearly define in normative and political terms what European strategic interests are will certainly dampen the development of strategic autonomy. Europe will certainly be seeing increasing foreign direct investment in strategic areas such as energy systems and infrastructure. Therefore, when the EU framework for screening foreign direct investment is reviewed, particular attention should be paid to developing a common definition of European strategic interests. That will be the forthcoming challenge for Europe if it wants to drive the Union towards its next stage, strategic autonomy.

Note

1. This designation is without prejudice to position on status, and is in line with UN Security Council Resolution 1244/99 and the International Court of Justice Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

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