Impact of Ukraine war on European strategic autonomy

H.R.L. Perera[1]*

[1]University of Ruhuna

Abstract

The concept of a single entity in the name of 'International Society' is nothing but anarchy from the point of view of many analysts. Against this notion, nation-states would implement various strategies to achieve their national interests intact. Alliances have been made in many instances in the world to promote and achieve security interests and economic cooperation. The European Union (EU) is one such organization   in Europe established to secure economic and political cooperation among its member countries of Europe. Many European states also joined North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to achieve collective security together with the United States of America (USA). However, the most recent developments in international politics indicate that the EU has been drifting towards some degree of autonomy from the USA by entertaining a new concept known as 'European Strategic Autonomy' where Europe would be able to work together militarily without the assistance of the USA. The recent nationalist political wave moving across Europe, including 'Brexit' which was the movement in the United Kingdom (UK) that exited Britain from the EU, centered around the idea of political and economic autonomy. Furthermore, the controversial tri-party military alliance known as the AUKUS formulated between the USA, UK, and Australia, pushed the European state France to rely upon strategic autonomy. The ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia has however   questioned the prudence of a full strategic autonomy between European countries. This research focused on the impact of the Ukraine War on the concept of European Strategic Autonomy. The research problem is whether the Ukraine war has worked against the idea of European Strategic Autonomy. Based on a qualitative method, the research used existing literature for the analysis. Interpretive analysis based on the explanatory method was used to analyze existing literature. It was concluded that Ukraine war have impacted the idea of the strategic autonomy among European nations negatively, and it has raised new challenges to the EU.

Keywords: European Strategic Autonomy, European Union, Ukraine war

Introduction

International politics face various dilemmas from time to time. Different types of alliances have been formed by the nation-states in the world to serve their common interests. Some of these alliances have been made to achieve cooperation on economic and cultural matters, and some on security and defense purposes. In the days of the Cold War, a bipolar world system existed in which the USA and the USSR largely maintained the international order. The Western power block led by the USA made the security alliance known as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) consisting of the states around the Atlantic Ocean. To counter this multilateral defense cooperation, the USSR formed the now defunct military alliance known as the Warsaw Pact. These two alliances were the strongest military alliances that dominated the world during most of the 20th century. The distribution of global military power between NATO and Warsaw Pact in those days was described as a bipolar world system.

However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Warsaw Pact failed to exist and the NATO has been able to become the most dominant military alliance in the world. Today, however, the Russian Federation, the largest and strongest member existed in the USSR and in the Warsaw Pact has emerged as a formidable world power. Countries including Russia, Europe, USA and the People's Republic of China emerging as military powers created what is known as a multipolar world system, where many states, instead of two groups, maintain the international balance of military power. Until recently, the USA and most of the Western European countries had the same strategy regarding the policies towards the rest of the world. In the last decade, some European states resorted to isolationism in foreign policy and   strategic affairs. With the withdrawal of the UK with the Brexit referendum and some of the issues it had with the USA, Europe decided to promote a concept known as European strategy autonomy. Especially France became one of the leading states that wanted to promote European Strategic Autonomy, keeping the USA at bay, Some of the Western European countries were unhappy about strategies of the USA. In fact, the inactive nature of NATO made the French President Emmanuel Macron to famously declare that the NATO is brain dead. Likewise, European Nations wanted to proceed with European Strategic Autonomy.

In the meantime, the Ukraine-Russia war produced different security dilemmas throughout the Central European and Eastern European countries. Some of the Eastern European states, such as. Some of the eastern European states such as Finland as Sweden applied for NATO membership in order to counter the potential security threats arising from the conflict. Such new developments in Europe raised questions about the validity of European Strategic Autonomy. This research focused on 'what are the challenges that have been emerged by Ukraine war against the concept of European Strategy Autonomy and whether the   war had negatively affected the European Strategic Autonomy.

The concept of strategic autonomy

Strategic autonomy is the capacity of a state to overcome its national interests and adopt its assumed foreign policy without the help of or dependent on   foreign states. In other words, strategic autonomy shows how an individual state can reach its national interests   without being

constrained in any manner by other states. Strategic autonomy is the ability of a certain state to deal cooperatively with third parties or alone, in matters of foreign policy, national interests, and national security. "Strategic autonomy is the ability to set one's priorities and make one's own decisions in matters of foreign policy and security, together with the institutional, political, and material wherewithal to carry these through – in cooperation with third parties, or if need be alone" (Damen, 2022, p. 2).

"Strong strategic autonomy means being able to set, modify and enforce international rules, as opposed to (unwillingly) obeying rules set by others" (Damen, 2022, p. 2)

The national interests and foreign policy of a state should not oppose the national interests or the foreign policy of any other state, although, in the concept of strong strategic autonomy, a certain state does not obey or concern the interests or the demands of the parallel states and thinks only upon the priorities and desires of its own.

The Concept of European Strategic Autonomy

According to Lippert, Ondarza, & Perthes (2019), European Strategic Autonomy often conflates sovereignty, independence, unilateralism and autarky. However, the Greek etymology of the word autonomy suggests, the ability   to live by its laws or self-governance. Thus autonomy, compared to sovereignty, is a condition rather than a set of attributes, although an entity with the attributes of sovereignty is presumably able to ensure its autonomy. In other words, autonomy is a prerequisite of sovereignty. However, sovereignty as such is generally the attribute of a state, while nothing suggests that, in pursuing autonomy, the EU either aspires to statehood or believes it to be possible. This said, the autonomy the EU is after is 'strategic', suggesting that, in living by its laws, the EU aims to pursue its strategic interests – a notion that resonates with the 'geopolitical Commission' or the Union which 'speaks the language of power'.

However, autonomy does not necessarily entail independence, unilateralism or autarky. To live by its laws, rules, norms, and values, the EU should be prepared to act alone, while it does not need to. Multilateralism is a defining feature of the EU's internal constitution and external identity. Therefore, its instinct will always be to act with others, beginning with its core partners, the United Nations, the USA, and NATO, as well as regional organizations like the OSCE, the African Union, ASEAN or MERCOSUR. As such, EU is driven to seek selective engagement in areas of convergent interests even with China and Russia, which are states that the Union explicitly defines as strategic rivals or competitors, and whose actions at times are framed as outright threats (Daniel, 2018).

The European Strategic Autonomy denotes the capacity of the EU to act autonomously in the arenas of economic and defense policy without being dependent on other countries. The concept denotes the possibility or the ability of the EU to activate its foreign policy without relying upon other countries. The strategic autonomy of the EU can be described with different types of focus.

For instance, from 2013 to 2016, strategic autonomy was mainly seen as an approach to security and defense matters while from 2017 to 2019 it was considered a way to defend European

interests in a hostile geopolitical environment, marked by Brexit, the Trump Presidency, and China's growing assertiveness (Lippert, Ondarza, &Perthes, 2019). In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic shifted the focus to mitigating economic dependence on foreign supply chains. Since 2021, the scope of EU-SA has been applied to nearly all policy areas, including the values of the EU. The expression 'strategic autonomy' is often replaced by similar concepts, such as 'open strategic autonomy', 'strategic sovereignty', 'capacity to act' and 'resilience' (Lippert, Ondaraza &Perths,2019). Accordingly, the main focuses of the strategic autonomy of the EU are to defend European interests in a hostile geopolitical environment, and to mitigate economic dependence on foreign supply chains.

AUKUS military Alliance

Many recent incidents promoted the concept of European Strategic Autonomy. The recent military alliance known as AUKUS, which was established between the USA, the UK, and Australia, is one such reasons. This new military alliance excluded all the other European states while enrolling in the UK as a member. Once the UK   officially exited from the EU, the other European states started seeing the importance of European Strategic Autonomy. Existing alliances, such as NATO, were formulated by combining Western European and North American states. However, the emergence of AUKUS showed a split between the Western powers. This AUKUS military Alliance promotes a separate strategy conducted by the USA and the UK focusing on the Indo-Pacific region (Parker, 2021).

The AUKUS military alliance was formulated to facilitate Australia with nuclear-powered submarines. The USA and the UK have a greater interest in the Indo-Pacific region, especially the South China Sea. The South China Sea, where China used to flex its muscles and do military exploitations, has greater geopolitical strategic interest because it is through a region where most of the ships carrying oil and gas, especially from the Malacca strait, travel to China.   The UK and the USA provided nuclear-powered submarines to Australians to counter the Chinese expansion (TLDR,2022). However, the most significant factor about this military alliance is that Australia got into this alliance cancelling the agreement that they had with France to purchase their diesel-powered submarines. Accordingly, it created a certain division between Australia and France as well as between France and the USA.   For a moment France even contemplated to annul the diplomatic relations   with the USA.

With these developments, it provided a platform for the Europeans, especially France, to think differently about their strategy and foreign policy outside of the other Western powers such as the UK and the USA. Therefore, it could be argued that this tri-lateral military alliance known as the AUKUS reinforced the concept of European Strategic Autonomy because the USA and UK had implemented their strategy separately from the Europeans (TLDR, 2022).

Practical Challengers of European Strategic Autonomy

Brustlein (2018) illustrated ambitions and areas in focus when it comes to strategic autonomy. The author discussed actual ambitions and reality. Further, the author mentions that Europe should have higher aims of achieving an autonomous strategy and must develop a much more capable military mechanism to foster its strategy. It has been emphasized that Europe must be

more ambitious and allocation of more to the military should achieve the capabilities to operate parallel to NATO (Brustlein, 2018).

Järvenpää et al. (2019) mentioned several key areas that Europe needs to focus on when it comes to strategic autonomy. They further argue that Europe needs to develop its capabilities to gain the ability to intervene militarily without the assistance of the USA. The authors also believe that strategic autonomy can be accomplished while maintaining good relationships with the USA at the same time. If Europe wants to implement this concept properly, it will further strengthen rather than weakening transatlantic relations, the relations between the USA and Europe. The other factors which were focused on in this paper are that European states should agree to build institutional autonomy within the EU, based on existing structures such as the Political and Security Committee, EU Military Committee and Military Staff, and Military Planning and Conduct Capability. In addition, it has been argued that European states must take the need for defense cooperation to deliver capabilities more efficiently and to address redundancy in the defense industrial base seriously by working together within existing frameworks (Major & Alessandro, 2022). This research suggest a way how to make the implementation of the concept a reality.

Retter et al (2021) explain a wider perspective on the concept of European Strategic Autonomy. They covered a comprehensive area of the concept and its implications. According to them, "the path towards greater EU defense integration has been bumpy and focused on setting up new institutions, frameworks and programmers often without providing adequate resources, sustained political support or clear outputs. This legacy raises questions for the future of European Strategic Autonomy in defense and means some experts still view the concept with skepticism, especially across the Atlantic. The article mainly focuses on policy frameworks and implementations in the EU. The authors point out that Brexit played a major role when it came to the promotion of European Strategic Autonomy. According to them, if Britain had stayed with the EU, this concept would not have become a reality. But they also mentioned that the EU's ambition for autonomous defense has grown due to the desire for strategic autonomy (Retter & Perezed, 2021).

Gallad and Thompson (2018) Stressed that transatlantic states need a more serious security approach than just the European Strategic Autonomy. They mentioned that further collaboration should be there with the EU, the USA, and post-Brexit Britain to strengthen transatlantic security. These states should try to achieve common goals by strengthening their relationship with each other. The article mentions that a new alliance should be made to fill the vacuum in transatlantic security and defense and be prepared for the next generation of possible threats that can occur (Gallad & Thompson, 2018).

Lazarou (2022) argues that the EU has its instruments and policies to influence which was also mentioned in their recently published document known as 'Strategic Compass'. According to Lazarou (2022), the policies that are promoted the world over will drive states to promote democracy the world over. That is why the EU can encourage other democratic states to implement measures such as sanctions to prevent any act of unnecessary aggression that occurs in international society (Lazarou, 2022). The sanctions implemented by the collective West against Russian Federation due to the Ukraine war is an example of that. Lazarou (2022) stresses the importance of policies rather than the military to influence international society.

Most of literature has focused on the importance and implementation ability of European Strategic Autonomy. Although there was a broad explanation of the influence of European Strategic Autonomy, there was no specific elaboration on whether the war will influence the idea of strategic autonomy negatively. It was clear there is a lacuna of knowledge that needs to be filled, and that was the research gap addressed in this research. The purpose of this research was to find out whether the Ukraine war has harmed the idea of European Strategic Autonomy.

Methodology

This research was based on a qualitative method. Existing literature on the research topic in the form of research papers, online journal articles, videos, and YouTube interviews was used as the source material of the research. The method of analysis was interpretive analysis based on the explanatory method. Because of vibrant literature, the explanatory method is the most appropriate method of analysis for this research topic.

Results and discussion

Most of the literature that was quoted here showed the EU's ability to implement strategic autonomy in   a dilemma. Especially with Ukraine war some of the Eastern European States such as Georgia, Kosova, Bosnia also wanted to Join NATO. The developments that occurred during the Ukrainian war have questioned the existence and the implementation ability of European Strategic Autonomy.

Ceratonia mentions that NATO remains the collective defense authority that could facilitate the defense requirements of the European nations. European reliance on critical supply chains, dwindling defense investments, lagging technological innovation, the need for full-spectrum capability development, and the inefficiencies in arms procurement, highlighted weakness of NATO, which is still regarded as the foundation of collective defense. It has also highlighted the central role of the USA in European security and defense, in terms of both geo-political leadership and operational support. According to the author, the USA still plays a major role in the European defense sector through NATO (Dempsey, 2023).

Colomina mentioned that the sudden Russian invasion of Ukraine unpredictably caused Europe to reconsider the idea of strategic autonomy. According to him, Europeans continue to be aware of the limitations that they have in technology and defense capabilities. If they are to implement an autonomous strategy, they should first have autonomy in energy and other economic matters (Dempsey, 2023).

Dassu mentions that NATO remains a key pillar of European security. According to the author, the EU has not necessarily been damaged by this recognition, however, provided it can now commit to rethinking its priorities. Yet it should do so starting not from defense but from a different kind of strategic autonomy: it should focus on the ability to cope with a challenging global economic-technological environment in which the citizens' wellbeing is threatened by various disruptive factors, such as energy supplies and key technologies that are only indirectly related to military issues. Dassu mentions further illustrated that Europe still lacks a solid

economic and technological base to implement an autonomous strategy. The Ukraine-Russian crisis has shown them they are weaklings and there are vacuums that they need to fill up before implementing such kind of an autonomous strategy (Dempsey 2023).

Strategic autonomy in defense means other key power dimensions need to be fully mobilized at the EU level before any tangible benefit can be achieved in strict military terms. The priority should be to act effectively, but not to become autonomous with the USA, the EU's closest ally. France says that strategic autonomy is never over with the Ukraine war because it never existed. Europe has always been dependent on most of its strategic capabilities. Even considering nuclear capability they still need assistance from the rest of the Western world (Dempsey, 2023). Russia's war in Ukraine is also impossible to interpret without factoring in its nuclear dimension. In this context, Europe's autonomy of decision, and indeed of action, cannot and should not exist in isolation from British or American endeavors.

Some of the collective issues that are faced by the EU have also been highlighted. Because, in certain cases, they cannot make unanimous decisions regarding the security and defense approaches. Russia's war against Ukraine should have been a critical juncture in increasing the reserves of EU members to strengthen the capability and action aspects of strategic autonomy in European defense and security. Instead, it again highlighted how Europe lacks the willingness to act autonomously even when confronted with matters of utmost strategic importance (Dempsey, 2023).

Another development that could be seen in Europe was that Eastern European countries are gaining more ability to influence. Eastern European countries also have a say in the strategies that are ready to be implemented by the EU. Countries like Finland, Norway, and Sweden wanted to obtain membership of NATO. However, the main argument of President Macron was that Europe is still too dependent on NATO regarding security affairs, which means that they are still dependent on the USA regarding security and defense. Therefore, President Macron wants to create a European defense mechanism and to be autonomous in their military strategy. However, the Ukraine war has highlighted that the EU is still dependent on the USA in security matters and it has proven Macron's argument that Europe is still dependent on the USA regarding   security matters. (TLDR News EU,2022) The idea of formulating an autonomous defense initiative among the European nations is not going to happen while the Ukraine war is going on, because states like Sweden Obtained the membership of NATO.

The other argument here is that, with the idea of European Strategic Autonomy, France will achieve superiority in the military in the absence of the USA. It would be a French led military alliance that would command Europe   promoting France as the most superior state in Europe. Eastern European countries prefer the Americans to remain as the security facilitator then providing a dominant power to France to become the command in chief of Europe (TLDR News EU, 2022).

Major and Marrone (2022) argues that although there is a discussion about strategic autonomy EU should develop a good collaboration partnership with the UK and the USA. There is a certain requirement for a collective approach to address some of the significant challenges that they face in the field of security. Although the UK's withdrawal from the EU through the Brexit referendum, the EU should try to develop a partnership with the UK as well. This current tension that Europe has with Russia can only be handled through such partnerships. Strategic autonomy can be maintained with partnerships (Major & Marrone, 2022). The authors of this research did not argue that   Europe should refuse to accept the idea of strategic autonomy. While promoting autonomy, they should get into partnerships with   states and alliances to counter new security issues created by the Ukraine and Russian war.

Helwig, N., & Sinkkonen (2022) mentions different factors that can be used to implement European Strategic Autonomy. In the pre-war scenario, strategic autonomy would have been the best method to implement. In the period before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, strategic autonomy could have been a gateway to better EU-Russia relations in a more multipolar world. "In the post-2022 context, it could rather constitute a mere 'rebranding' of the European pillar of a transatlantic alliance that maintains an antagonistic relationship with Russia. For the US, in turn, Martin and Sinkkonen illustrate how strategic autonomy creates a new dilemma" (Helwig & Sinkkonen,2022). Currently, with this development of war, strategic autonomy and its approach should be amended by the EU. Europe could not conduct the same strategy that they had been conducting before this Ukrainian-Russia conflict.

Dijkstra (2022) mentions that the Ukraine-Russia war has become a game changer for EU security policies. It further says that the EU, as a security actor, should consider re-aligning with the USA. Furthermore, the author mentioned that the current context leaves less room for the EU as a full-fledged security actor. "To be sure, European countries finally seem to have woken up to the need for more defense spending. There is a new Strategic Compass and initiatives such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation continue." However, any serious discussion around strategic autonomy has at least temporarily stalled because the European engagement is moving along with the USA and within the context of NATO (Dijkstra,2022).

Majcin and Bento (2022) argue that if Europe is willing to implement an autonomous strategy, they need to significantly increase their investments in the military, and it is obviously questionable in this kind of scenario. EU needs to modernize their weapons and military. The authors mentioned that Europe alone cannot do that without the assistance of the USA. Especially considering the air combat fighter jets, the EU is still extremely dependent on the USA. "A few EU member states, including Germany, are already queuing to get Lockheed Martin's F-35s as no European aerospace producer is able to manufacture a comparable fighter jet." They argued further that Europe is reliant, and indeed is dependent, on the American defense industry for its security. This was a fair and factual observation, not because the European industry is unable to produce quality weapons and systems, but because Europe made the political choice to rely on the US decades ago. Considering that, we can assume the EU cannot fight alone against any threat arising from Russia or any other aggressor in the region (Majcin & Bento, 2022).

 Furthermore, the author argued that the USA considers the security of Europe is more important than some of the European countries as well. The USA has provided far more military aid to

Ukraine than all of the EU nations in combination. The other argument that the authors put forward was that the EU does not need to be autonomous to achieve security in Europe. Europe only needs to understand European security as going beyond the European continent to join forces with the USA in combatting threats originating from other regions of the globe (Majcin & Bento, 2022).

As mentioned in most of the above literature, the reliance of European nations on NATO and the USA for defense is still a matter of concern. The other factor is that Eastern European nations tend to join NATO mainly because of the Ukrainian conflict. Csernatoni argues that Europe lacks the technological and economic capabilities for true autonomy, emphasizing the need for energy independence and other economic reforms. Dassu suggests that the EU must prioritize economic and technological resilience before considering military autonomy. As mentioned in the literature we could see that the strategic autonomy will not arrive at ease as the French President Macron suggests. Major and Marrone (2023) proposed partnerships with the UK and the USA to balance strategic autonomy with collective security needs. The idea of strategic autonomy is theoretically appealing, but practical implementation remains hindered due to divisions and dependency on external military support, particularly considering the ongoing Ukrainian conflict (Dempsey, 2023).

Conclusions

This study concludes that Europe must re-consider their concept of strategic autonomy with the developments of the Ukraine War. Considering the massive amount of threats that were generated with this war towards the Eastern European countries, most of the Eastern European states still believe that NATO is the getaway organization for collective security in Europe. Most of the literature concedes that the EU alone cannot face the military might of Russia without the assistance of the USA. Therefore, this study concluded that with the ongoing tension of the Ukraine War, the EU has arrived at a situation where they should consider moving away from the idea of European Strategic Autonomy at least temporarily. However, other scholars argue that strategic autonomy might be a requirement for the EU, regardless of the situation with the Ukraine War.

Conflicts of Interest

The author confirms that there is no conflict of interest.

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