EU Strategic Autonomy, including its implications for EU cooperation on defence and security

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I will examine the concept of EU strategic autonomy and recent developments in relation to the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), including the impact of the Ukraine war on these issues.

EU Strategic Autonomy

Recent debate on this issue emerged in the context of the 2016 EU Global Strategy, which declared strategic autonomy to be an objective of the European Union. In broad terms, strategic autonomy can be defined as independence in security and defence. In particular, in the European context, this means independence from the United States, which most EU member states have long depended on for defence through NATO. There is, however, no formal or agreed EU definition of strategic autonomy. This reflects divisions amongst EU member states. Some member states, such as France, place a strong emphasis on developing EU security and defence cooperation as a means of achieving autonomy vis-à-vis the United States. Others, such as Poland, are wary of undermining ties with the US or NATO and are thus more cautious with regard to EU security and defence cooperation. Other member states, such as Germany, Italy and the Netherlands, take a middle position which seeks to strengthen EU security and defence cooperation and maintain strong ties with the United States. As a result, below the level of broad rhetorical support for EU strategic autonomy, there are important differences between member states on the issue.

Initially, debate on EU strategic autonomy focused on defence and on autonomy vis-à-vis the United States. Over the last decade, however, the debate on European strategic autonomy has widened to encompass economics and technology, and to consider Europe's relations with other states. The logic here is that dependence on other states, in particular for key resources, materials or technologies, can create problems – for example, if supplies or access are cut-off or if other states seek to manipulate control of resources, materials or technologies for political ends. EU policy-makers thus argue that the EU needs to strengthen its autonomy or sovereignty in relation to various areas of economics, resources, critical materials and technologies. A range of policy initiatives have been taken at the European level to reduce dependence on other states, to diversify suppliers of key resources and technologies, and to strengthen Europe's ability to develop and produce its own technologies. China has been a particular focus of concern. More recently, in the context of the Ukraine war, ending energy dependence on Russia fits within this logic.

Irish governments have not felt it necessary to lay out a strong national position in this debate on European strategic autonomy, perhaps because Ireland's position does not neatly fit into the European-Atlanticist spectrum. One could argue that the Irish government needs to do more thinking about problems of dependence on external trade, resources and technology and how this can be addressed at the European, as well as national, level.

The Common Security and Defence Policy

The EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) is now more than twenty years old, having been established in 1999-2000. A number of features of the CSDP can be noted. It is largely inter-governmental, rather than supra-national, with decisions made by the member states on the basis of consensus. Decisions on whether to contribute to forces to operations and on whether to be involved in particular projects remain sovereign national decisions. As a result, the CSDP has enabled considerable flexibility in how member states engage with and participate in EU defence cooperation. Additionally, although the CSDP involves cooperation in relation to defence, the EU has not taken on the role of collective defence of member states' territory, where NATO remains the core institution for the majority of EU member states which are also NATO members.

The most recent doctrinal statement of policy in this area is the EU Strategic Compass, adopted in March 2022. The Strategic Compass identifies four areas in which it argues the EU needs to do more: acting in response to crises; securing the Union and its citizens; investing to enhance security and defence capabilities; and strengthening cooperation with partners towards common ends. The biggest headline item included in the Strategic Compass is the planned development of a Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC) of 5,000 troops, to be operational by 2025. As with other EU defence formations and operations, the RDC will be based on military contributions provided by member states. The Irish government has indicated it will contribute a company (about 100-120 troops) to the RDC. Overall, the Strategic Compass can be viewed as a step forward, but not a game changer, in terms of EU defence cooperation.

The Impact of the Ukraine War

What impact has the Ukraine war had on these various dynamics? In terms of EU strategic autonomy, for most EU member states the Ukraine war has reinforced the view that the US is central to European security and NATO is vital for their defence. As a consequence, the argument for strategic autonomy as independence from the US has been weakened. Although European states are increasing defence spending, this is primarily in the context of collective defence within NATO, also pointing away from EU strategic autonomy in defence.

The Ukraine war has also shifted the EU defence debate in other ways. First, in terms of capability development via various EU institutions and processes, the Ukraine war has shifted attention towards those capabilities likely to be needed for collective defence (and consequently away from those forces that might be needed for crisis management or expeditionary operations). Second, attention has shifted to using EU institutions and processes to provide Ukraine with the military capabilities to defend itself. This includes EU European Peace Facility (EPF) funding to Ukraine (now up to €3.6bn) and the EU Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine (EUMAM Ukraine), which is helping to train that country's armed forces. These are likely to be long-term changes. In future, EU capability development activities are likely to focus on those weapons, technologies and structures which member states need for national and collective self-defence. EU military support for

Ukraine is also likely to be a long-term project, designed to help Ukraine defeat Russia in the short-term and deter Russia in the longer-term.

Ireland's Position

Successive Irish governments have argued that engagement with EU defence cooperation is compatible with Ireland's policy of neutrality, because, as noted, engagement with the CSDP is flexible, remains a sovereign national decision and does not commit Ireland to collective defence. Additionally, the various EU and Irish government declarations agreed during the debates on the Nice and Lisbon Treaties in the 2000s provide further guarantees relating to Irish neutrality.

In the foreseeable future, radical changes to CSDP, such as truly supra-national integration or the EU taking on responsibility for collective defence of its member states, are unlikely. As a consequence, involvement in EU defence cooperation and the CSDP is likely to remain compatible with Ireland's policy of neutrality.

Irish governments have been cautious – arguably excessively cautious – in engaging with EU defence cooperation. Ireland could do more to shape and contribute to EU defence cooperation and the CSDP. If one examines Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), for example, Irish involvement has been limited (- the decision in 2022 to join four additional PESCO projects, beyond the then one Ireland was involved in, was welcome). More active engagement with EU defence cooperation and the CSDP could enable Ireland to shape that cooperation, be seen as a contributor rather than a free-rider and help the Defence Forces develop the capabilities they need.