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# Strategic autonomy of the European Union in the politics of France before and after Russian aggression in Ukraine

**Autonomia strategiczna Unii Europejskiej w polityce Francji przed i po agresji Rosji w Ukrainie**

**Summary:** The aim of the article is to present the proposal by France as the initiator of the development of the strategic autonomy of the European Union and the politics of France before and after Russian aggression in Ukraine. The idea of the European Union's involvement in the defence sphere has been with us for years; however, the concept of strategic autonomy is differently understood in the Member States of the European Union. For this reason, the following research questions were formulated: How is the strategic autonomy of the European Union understood in the politics of France? What is the position of France in reference to developing a "Europe of defence" for the European Union's security and defence policy? How does Russia's aggression in Ukraine affect the development of the European Union's strategic autonomy in France's policy? How does Russia's aggression in Ukraine affect France's position on the spread of the EU's strategic autonomy? It would seem that the outbreak of the war in Ukraine constitutes an existential test for strategic autonomy.

**Keywords:** strategic autonomy, European Union, politics, France, Russia's aggression, Ukraine

**Streszczenie:** Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie Francji jako inicjatora rozwoju autonomii strategicznej Unii Europejskiej i jej polityki przed i po agresji Rosji w Ukrainie. Idea zaangażowania Unii w obszar obronności i bezpieczeństwa była znana od lat. Pojęcie autonomii strategicznej jest różnie rozumiane w państwach członkowskich Wspólnoty. Z tego powodu sformułowano następujące pytania badawcze: jak rozumiana jest autonomia strategiczna Unii Europejskiej w polityce Francji? Jakie jest stanowisko Francji w kwestii budowania „Europy bezpiecznej” polityki bezpieczeństwa i obrony Unii Eu-

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ropejskiej? Jak agresja Rosji w Ukrainie przyczynia się do rozwoju autonomii strategicznej Unii Europejskiej w polityce Francji? W jaki sposób agresja Rosji na Ukrainie wpływa na stanowisko Francji w zakresie rozwoju strategicznej autonomii UE?

Należy przypuszczać, że wybuch wojny w Ukrainie stanowi zgubny test na rzecz strategicznej autonomii.

**Słowa kluczowe:** autonomia strategiczna, Unia Europejska, polityka, Francja, agresja Rosji, Ukraina

The idea of the European Union's involvement in the defence sphere has been with us for years. It appeared in treaties, and even manifested itself as a separate organization in the 1950s, as the Western European Union.

Before Russian aggression in Ukraine, we had witnessed how the leader of the United States, the strongest state in NATO, questioned the legitimacy of the defence of all Allies, especially when they do not allocate the contractual equivalent of 2% of GDP to such defence. This rhetoric increased fears among Europeans that it was time to stop relying on the United States. They were loudest in the words of the President of France, Emmanuel Macron, talking about NATO going into a state of brain death.

The EU's strategic autonomy understood as the ability to react independently to crises and threats appeared in the conclusions of the European Council of December 2013 and in the EU Global Strategy of 2016.

The concept of strategic autonomy is differently understood in the Member States of the European Union, especially in the understanding of France.

Since 2016, France has been the main promoter of initiatives aimed at developing a "Europe of defence" for the EU's security and defence policy. It is about creating a structure by combining the already existing instruments: military cooperation under PESCO, planning military capabilities, and financial support for armaments projects from the European Defense Fund. This concept was aimed at states that would be politically and militarily ready to engage in such cooperation. This would mean creating a hard core of the EU that would shape the thinking about security and defence policy.

President Emmanuel Macron, in his speech at the Sorbonne in 2017 announced that "Europe should, within ten years, create a common intervention force, a common defence budget, and a common

military doctrine”<sup>1</sup>. However, in 2018 the French president spoke about the proposals for the so-called mutual defence clause and the need to discuss a review of the European security architecture. At the end of 2019, in turn, he stated that “NATO is brain dead” and spoke of “the need to draw consequences for European defence from it”<sup>2</sup>. The French understand autonomy as the ability of the state to choose its own limitations according to its free will. For France, European strategic autonomy is the choice made by the Member States over constraints imposed by the institutional framework of the European Union in place of restrictions implemented by the US or other players with which they do not necessarily have a compatible interest and perception of the world. It should be emphasized that the EU’s strategic autonomy is impossible without close cooperation with the United Kingdom, given the quality of its armed forces and its contribution to military research and development. PESCO, on the other hand, is treated by France as an institutional way of building the Union.

France uses the idea of the EU’s strategic autonomy as an instrument of its own foreign policy. Its aim is to redefine the partnership between the European Union and the US as well as NATO. In his statements, President Emmanuel Macron stressed the differences between the positions of the US and the EU, especially in relations with China and Russia. It is worth noting that such statements are of concern to some EU countries, especially with regard to the EU security policy and insufficient financing of the Common Security and Defence Policy. The problem is the lack of a clear definition of strategic autonomy. Germany’s Minister of National Defence, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, in the journal *Politico*, said these words before Russia’s aggression in Ukraine that “illusions about European strategic autonomy” must end, because “Europeans will not be able to replace America’s key

1 P. Brançon, *5 takeaways from Macron’s big speech on Europe’s future*, *Politico*, 26 September 2017, <https://www.politico.eu/article/5-takeaways-from-macrons-big-speech-on-europes-future/> [28.11.2022].

2 J. Gotkowska, *Europejska Inicjatywa Interwencyjna, czyli francuski pomysł na obronę Europy*, Klub Jagielloński, 30 December 2019, <https://klubjagiellonski.pl/2019/12/30/europejska-inicjatywa-interwencyjna-czyli-francuski-pomysl-na-obrone-europy/> [23.01.2022].

role as a security provider”<sup>3</sup>. This caused a sharp polemic on the part of French President Emmanuel Macron.

President Macron used the concept of the strategic autonomy of the European Union in order to loosen transatlantic cooperation and promote the idea of an EU superpower. It is worth emphasizing that during Donald Trump’s presidency, the disagreements between the US and the European Union fostered French efforts to loosen up. The change in the position of the US president did not induce the French authorities to give up the idea of strategic autonomy but rather forced them to look for new arguments in its favour<sup>4</sup>.

Due to the fact that the format of permanent structured cooperation under PESCO has been watered down, France has launched the European Intervention Initiative (E2I). E2I operates outside the institutional framework of the Union and has different goals. It is one of the elements of the French vision of a “Europe of Defence”. It operates on common interests and perceptions that already exist in some areas to deliver concrete military and operational capabilities much faster than would be the case with PESCO cooperation.

Based on the letter of intent, E2I is a format of military cooperation outside the EU or NATO structures; “a flexible and non-binding forum for participating states that are able and willing to engage their forces and capabilities when needed to protect European security interests regardless of the institutional framework”. The long-term goal of E2I is to build a sense of responsibility in European countries for the southern neighbourhood of Europe and to gain the ability to independently carry out missions outside their own territory. E2I places emphasis on missions outside Europe and does not refer directly to collective defence, although it is supposed to take into account the full spectrum of possible crises. It is also intended not to duplicate NATO’s military structures or undermine cooperation within the EU, especially within the framework of the PESCO mechanism. E2I is intended to launch its own projects in PESCO. The goal pursued through the European Intervention Initiative (E2I) was launched by Emmanuel

3 H.J. von der Burchard, *German defense minister expresses surprise over Macron criticism*, Politico, 24 November 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/annegret-kramp-karrenbauer-defense-germany-nato-macron-alliance/> [23.01.2022].

4 Ibidem.

Macron in 2017. The French initiative was primarily intended to provide an additional format of cooperation that will increase the likelihood of responding to threats. France considered Islamic terrorism in Africa and the Middle East to be the greatest threat to French and European security. The key advantage of E2I is, therefore, the ability to be flexible in responding to crises, even in the event of a decision paralysis by NATO or the EU. E2I, on the other hand, will operate primarily in Africa, where allied operations would be politically difficult to implement<sup>5</sup>. After the creation of E2I, France began to increasingly involve European partners in its military operations in the area of the EU's southern neighbourhood such as the Barkhane and Takuba operations in the Sahel as well as the EMASOH maritime operation in the Strait of Hormuz.

France had to change its position with regard to the creation of an EU hard core in security and defence policy, which led to a negotiated compromise. Germany took a broad, inclusive, and integrative approach to EU military cooperation. Germany took the position that E2I should not duplicate NATO's military structures and undermine cooperation within the EU, especially within the framework of the PESCO mechanism.

France believed that the shape of NATO, which remains a collective defence alliance due to the threat from Russia, increases Russia's aggressiveness by defining the priorities of its defence doctrine. France has seen the threats of Russia's actions but does not want the European Union to have to cooperate closely with the US. The Russian factor was very important in French policy towards Poland and other Central European countries. This is confirmed by numerous statements by the presidents of France, leading representatives of French diplomacy, and many personalities on the French political scene<sup>6</sup>.

The outbreak of the war in Ukraine constitutes an existential test for strategic autonomy as it forced EU countries to react. In recent

5 M. Terlikowski, W. Lorenz, *Wzmacnianie europejskich zdolności reagowania kryzysowego: propozycja Francji i Wielkiej Brytanii*, Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych, 28 June 2018, [https://pism.pl/publikacje/Wzmacnianie\\_europejskich\\_zdolno\\_ci\\_reagowania\\_kryzysowego\\_\\_propozycja\\_Francji\\_i\\_Wielkiej\\_Brytanii](https://pism.pl/publikacje/Wzmacnianie_europejskich_zdolno_ci_reagowania_kryzysowego__propozycja_Francji_i_Wielkiej_Brytanii) [23.01.2022].

6 K.J. Helnarska, *Ewolucja stanowisk Francji i Polski w dziedzinie bezpieczeństwa i obrony*, Warsaw 2016, p. 90.

years, the French idea of strategic autonomy has enjoyed particular support not only from Paris but also from Berlin. Moreover, in many respects, it gained increasing interest throughout Europe and concerned not only hard military security but also energy security, for example. The transatlantic theme is also crucial here, as strategic autonomy is intended to equip Europe with a US-independent capacity. For this reason, this concept has created a certain tension from the outset, leading to divisions between those Member States, particularly France, which considered that Europe is ready to become strategically independent from America and those countries, particularly in the east of the EU, considered that Europe is not ready to become strategically independent from America. That is why the reaction of France and Germany is so important and is a test of the credibility of French-German leadership in the European Union. It is also a test for the potential basis and building of the future European foreign and security policy for these two countries. Looking at the response of the governments in Berlin and Paris, conclusions can be drawn as to whether they can be treated as co-guarantors of European security.

While it is still a little too early to pass judgment on the future of the concept of European strategic autonomy, the dynamics of the current events do not really favour the countries of NATO's Eastern flank accepting the French vision of autonomy.

This is due to two things. Firstly, the talks between Macron and Putin, especially in the eyes of Eastern Europeans, seem to be unjustified, because they do not produce any tangible results, and they also build the image of Putin as a leader with whom we can sit at a table and talk. This is happening at a time when the world is trying to isolate the Russian President. The second factor, in turn, is the low credibility of Berlin due mainly to an incomprehensible reactioner the slowness of Chancellor Olav Scholz in implementing the process of transferring arms systems to Ukraine.

Doubts about the leadership of France and Germany arise not only in eastern parts of Central Europe but also in the north of the continent. Finland and Sweden are planning to join NATO and the recent report of the Swedish parliament working Group on the consequences of the war in Ukraine states that there is a clear lack of political will among EU countries to build collective defence within the Union.

By analysing the statements of decision-makers from Finland and Sweden, we can see that the concept of European strategic autonomy is dead. The current dynamics are against this idea because for all countries in the east of the EU, it becomes clear that NATO is the main guarantor of security and there is no alternative to it. The involvement of the US and the multi-level support that the Americans provide to Ukraine has no equivalent in any other EU country, and certainly not in Paris or Berlin.

Macron would like to make what Charles de Gaulle said in 1962<sup>7</sup> a reality: “What is Europe about? It must serve to avoid being dominated by either the Americans or the Russians (...). If France manages to be the first of the six (...) she will be able to wield this Archimedes lever. She will be able to lead the others. Europe is the way for France to become again what it ceased to be at Waterloo: first in the world”<sup>8</sup>.

The idea of strategic autonomy for Europe has just crashed and burned in Ukraine. Other than a flurry of failed attempts at personal diplomacy with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Macron has been all but absent in mobilizing Europe’s response to the gravest threat to the continent since 1945. Macron’s idea of strategic autonomy, which he has articulated at length at Sorbonne University’s annual French ambassadorial conferences, the French War College, and the European Parliament, this edifice of his ideas, has several core elements that led Macron straight into his fiasco with Putin<sup>9</sup>.

France has launched some modest military initiatives within the European Union, although they are nowhere near as effective as NATO’s capabilities and structures. But whereas the United States could abandon Europe at any time, Macron argues, “there can be no defence and security project for European citizens without (...) gradual rebuilding of confidence with Russia”. With Putin, he aimed to “build a new architecture based on trust and security in Europe”. Indeed, he claimed that countries such as the United States were urging Europe to “impose more sanctions on Russia because it is in their interest”. Europe’s

7 Ibidem.

8 Ch. de Gaulle, *Pamiętniki wojenne. T. 3, Ocalenie: 1944-1946*, Warsaw 1968, p. 121.

9 B.M.J. Szewczyk, *Macron’s Vision for European Autonomy Crashed and Burned in Ukraine*, Foreign Policy, 8 April 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/08/macron-putin-france-russia-ukraine-europe-sovereignty-strategy/> [23.10.2022].

interests, Macron said, would “most certainly not” be served by sanctions on Russia<sup>10</sup>.

Macron’s intellectual edifice collapsed under the weight of its own illusions and contradictions after the Russian aggression in Ukraine. Macron bet on diplomacy and his own intellect to reconcile Russia’s perceived concerns by constructing “a new security and stability order” for Europe with Putin. He flew to Moscow first and to Kyiv only afterward – in contrast to other leaders, such as German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, who coordinated his position with the Ukrainians first. To no one’s surprise, except perhaps Macron’s, diplomacy without leverage proved to be ineffective<sup>11</sup>.

After the Russian aggression in Ukraine, Macron still did not admit he had gravely misjudged Putin. His diplomatic initiative was based on calls to Moscow since the invasion. He claimed that the “European continent will never be stable, will never be secure, if we do not ease and clarify our relations with Russia”.

Macron’s choices are not just tactical misjudgements; they reflect long-standing strategic decisions that rest on a deeply held intellectual construct. Macron has been all but invisible on the Ukraine crisis over the last few weeks. Whether that is because he has changed his mind on the desirability of accommodating Russia and its so-called security concerns is unclear.

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So far, it has not been possible to work out a vision of European defence common to the entire Union, and development has been hampered by the national interests of its members. The discrepancies mean that from a number of areas set out in the EU’s global strategy in 2016, only half of them were taken up by the Union by 2020<sup>12</sup>. Member States prefer to independently develop military cooperation with those countries that best meet their expectations, while EU initiatives (also due to the limited budget) are treated as an addition.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>12</sup> European Defence Agency, *2020 Card Report*, <https://eda.europa.eu/docs/default-source/reports/card-2020-executive-summary-report.pdf> [23.01.2022].



As stated above, strategic autonomy for Europe as suggested by France has faltered and led Macron straight to his fiasco with Putin. While it is still a little too early to give judgment on the future of the concept of European strategic autonomy, the dynamics of the current events do not really favour the countries of NATO's Eastern flank accepting the French vision of autonomy.

Ukraine's recent successes in the war with Russia mean that the leaders of France, Germany, and Italy are beginning to consider the victory for Ukrainians as possible and fear that such "humiliation" of Russia would create new political problems. Some countries are in favour of a solution to the conflict that would allow Moscow to "save face", even if this would mean giving it a part of the territory of Ukraine. Western European leaders fear that the win for Ukraine would destabilize Russia, giving an opportunity to normalize relations on energy issues. While French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz reiterated that it was for Ukraine to establish the conditions for the cessation of armed activities, they recently acknowledged that they would prefer the ceasefire to take place "earlier rather than later". Macron recently declared to the European Parliament that Europe "is not in a state of war with Russia" and, once peace has been established, it would have to create a new strategy for the balance of security. This is a statement after which "the red light lights up in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe". The Ukrainian politicians argue that any concessions to Russia on the territory of Ukraine, including Crimea, would open the door to further Russian invasion.

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