CHAPTER 1

# Introduction

**Abstract** Over the past decade, the global geopolitical context has changed significantly. We have seen a power shift with a more assertive Russia and China and the rise of a more complex and competitive multi-polar system. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, international and European security has been placed on high alert. Transatlantic relations also seem to be strong—at least for now. Nevertheless, there is a general agreement that Europe must strengthen its capacity to ensure its own security. But how to make sense of European actorness—also referred to as European sovereignty or strategic autonomy—in the current context? The argument we put forward in this introductory chapter is twofold. First, that strategic autonomy ultimately involves much more than building an autonomous European defence structure or an autonomous Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). After two decades of having to deal with different types of crises that have everything to do with European security, but are not necessarily concerned with defence against military threats, this has become increasingly evident. The COVID-19 pandemic is a case in point. Even today, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the main threats against Western democracies are of a hybrid nature rather than of a direct military one. Thus, European strategic autonomy has to include a capacity to protect Europe against of such hybrid threats as well. The second part of the argument is that building European strategic autonomy, in a way that makes Europe better at addressing these challenges, will more likely strengthen rather

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than weaken both transatlantic relations and other types of partnerships with actors that share the same basic values.

**Keywords** Strategic autonomy · European integration · Security · Differentiated integration

Over the past decade, the global geopolitical context has changed significantly. We have seen a power shift with a more assertive Russia and China and the rise of a more complex and competitive multi-polar system. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, international and European security has been placed on high alert. Transatlantic relations also seem to be stronger than ever—at least for now. Nevertheless, there is a general agreement that Europe must now strengthen its capacity to ensure its own security. But how to make sense of European actorness—also referred to as European sovereignty or strategic autonomy—in the current context?

The implications of the brutal Russian military invasion and war against Ukraine are manifold, and the full consequences of the invasion will take time to materialise. While there is general agreement over the need to boost collective European capacity to ensure security and stability on the continent, there is a disagreement over how this can best be achieved. Concepts such as strategic sovereignty and autonomy have become highly controversial as some, including the Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), fear that it will imply a weakening of the transatlantic relationship (Stoltenberg, 2022, 2023). However, the recent enlargement of NATO, with both EU members Sweden and Finland bidding to join the Alliance, shows the exact opposite. In this volume, strategic sovereignty and autonomy will be applied as analytical concepts as we try to investigate how and to what extent increased European strategic autonomy has been or is about to be achieved.

A common answer to the question of strategic autonomy in the scholarly literature is that developing an independent European capacity for security and defence is too challenging, and is therefore unlikely to be achieved in the short term (Meijer & Brooks, 2021). In this book, we question both assumptions, building on our own previous work (Rieker, 2021; Rieker & Giske, 2021) and the work of a few scholars and policy analysts who have been challenging these arguments for some time

(Alcaro & Tocci, 2021; Howorth, 2019a, 2019b). This will be done by showing that an evaluation of the state of European strategic autonomy is largely dependent on our understanding of both this concept and the concept of European actorness—concepts that are closely related. For instance, our analysis will differ depending on whether our understanding of European actorness is built solely on EU capacity, or whether it is built on a more complex European system of Differentiated Integration (DI) among European states that share common values but are not always formally members of same institutions.

The argument we put forward is twofold. First, that strategic autonomy ultimately involves much more than building an autonomous European defence structure or an autonomous Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). After two decades of having to deal with different types of crises that have everything to do with European security, but are not necessarily concerned with defence against military threats, this has become increasingly evident. The COVID-19 pandemic is a case in point. Even today, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the main threats against Western democracies are of a hybrid nature rather than of a direct military one, and responses to these threats need to reflect this. In order to build European autonomy, one has to factor in these hybrid threats as well. While potential military threats should not be ignored and strengthening military capabilities is likely to continue to be at the top of the agenda of European states and institutions, these capabilities cannot do much to protect Europe against non-military threats. For this a broader toolbox is required. The second part of the argument is that building European strategic autonomy, in a way that makes Europe better at addressing these challenges, will more likely strengthen rather than weaken both transatlantic relations and other types of partnerships with non-European actors that share the same basic values. The recent expansion of NATO makes the overlap in membership greater and is therefore likely to strengthen both European strategic autonomy and transatlantic relations.

## 1.1 Conceptual Clarification: European Integration and Security

As argued above, how we analyse the state of European strategic autonomy or actorness will depend on how we conceptualise *European integration* and *security*. The EU will most likely never become a federal

state comparable to the US. Nevertheless, European democracies, with the EU at the centre, have in recent decades shown that they have been able to handle a series of crises together. This has, in turn, advanced the EU's role as a security actor (Riddervold et al., 2021). In this book we build on the arguments in the literature that urge caution in underestimating Europe's agency and its ability to adapt and overcome these constraints (Alcaro & Djikstra, Forthcoming; Rieker & Giske, 2021). We argue that the main explanation for why Europe's capacity as a security actor continues to be underestimated, and why the concept of strategic autonomy is so highly contested, is that these ideas have been based on a too narrow understanding of both European integration and European security. We will therefore start by clarifying these two concepts.

### *1.1.1 European Integration and Strategic Autonomy*

So far, European integration has been understood primarily (and sometimes exclusively) in relation to European Union (EU) processes (Haas, 1958, 1964; Moravcsik, 1998). Even with the introduction of the concept of Differentiated Integration (DI), defined as a process where some actors choose to continue integrating further in certain policy fields while others elect to remain partly on the outside, the basic understanding of integration did not change much. Still, the focus was on DI continued to be exclusively about the processes within the EU—with concepts such as "multi speed," "à la carte," or "variable geography" (Stubb, 1996). More recent studies of the concept have also mainly focused on the EU (Leruth et al., 2022), ignoring the broader European integration process, to which the EU constitutes the core or centre of gravity, but other European non-members—the UK, European Economic Area (EEA)-states, and other partner countries, as well as other multilateral institutions such as NATO—contribute.

While there is a large literature on external Europeanisation (Lavenex, 2004, 2011; Rieker, 2016), this has so far been analysed as an extension of the EU's internal policy, and not as a key part of a DI process that may also strengthen Europe's actorness. This thinking has also greatly influenced the general understanding of what European security integration is all about, as well as of strategic autonomy. For instance, it has led to a general understanding that the EU remains insufficiently equipped to provide a full spectrum of foreign and security policy. In addition to the lack of military capabilities (Meijer & Brooks, 2021), three main

constraints against the EU playing a more important role as a strategic actor have been identified: internal contestation among member states; fragmentation of state authority and regional governance; and multi-polar competition (Alcaro et al., 2022).

With the Treaty of Maastricht (1993), foreign and security policy became a formal part of the EU for the first time. Since then, the EU's involvement in foreign and security policy, conventionally the business of sovereign states, has continued to confound scholars of European integration, in particular supporters of traditional theories of International Relations (IR) (Dijkstra & Vanhoonacker, 2017). Central to the debate on the EU as a foreign and security policy actor is how EU policy in these fields relates to the policies of its member states. The occasionally tense relationship between the various member states, and between member states and EU institutions, has made the Union unable to forge a truly common foreign and security policy (Reichwein, 2015). Additionally, the lines between internal and external policies in the EU have become increasingly blurred, as the Union stresses the need for a more holistic approach. The result of this mixture of internal and external policies and initiatives is a network of integration with the EU at its core. How, therefore, should we understand European strategic autonomy on the basis of such a differentiated network?

To help us analyse European actorness in as systematic way and open it up to include more than EU processes, we will draw on the generic concept of integration introduced by Jim March in the 1990. According to him, integration (vertical and horizontal) can be defined as *a continuum between a state of no integration at one end and full integration (some form of a federal system) at the other end* (March, 1999, p. 134). As most European interaction can be situated somewhere between these two extremes, it makes sense to use the concept of *Differentiated Integration* (DI). What is characteristic of this definition of DI is that it may include a whole range of different combinations of interactions, with different degrees of both uniformity (level of cooperation/harmonisation) and integration (horizontal/participation and vertical/transfer of power) depending on the policy areas and participating states (Rieker, 2021). In Chapter 2 we will show how in more detail how (differentiated) integration can be understood as a function of horizontal and vertical integration and uniformity.

While the EU remains at the core of such a differentiated system (in partnership with NATO in the military domain), there are also numerous

other processes of a bilateral or minilateral[1] character, as well as regional and sub-regional initiatives, which need to be taken into account to paint the full picture of European security integration. This will also help us better understand the status of European strategic autonomy. As there are a wide variety of initiatives and policies that increase the European capacity to act, there are no good reasons why European actorness in the security field should be limited to the EU only. In the end, European foreign and security policy is increasingly a result of a combination of EU policies and various cooperation frameworks of an informal and formal character. While most of them have some kind of association with the EU, they also exist independent of the EU. What is key is that all these processes have to be taken into account to have an accurate understanding of European actorness and European strategic sovereignty.

This understanding of EU foreign and security policy, as a broad framework involving not only the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and CSDP but also a variety of "softer" areas, has been gradually accepted (Bretherton & Vogler, 2006; Rhinard & Sjöstedt, 2019), at least in theory. However, what has been less recognised is the importance of including processes that are not formally part of the EU, but which remain closely linked to it. These are processes, both formal and informal, which include non-EU members as well, or processes that are initiated by EU members outside the EU framework, but which increase integration when taken together. Where EU studies often have a tendency to see such processes as a challenge to the EU—as they may undermine the institutional processes—we argue that they can equally lead to the opposite, namely a strengthening of EU(ropean) capacity to act, as well as increasing EU(ropean) strategic autonomy.

The recent inclusion of Finland and Sweden in NATO, as well as the aspirations of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia to become members in the future, shows that the alliance remains the strongest and most dependable security guarantee for European states. Nevertheless, increased European strategic autonomy through DI will make Europe a more flexible and effective actor in the broader area of security and defence.

[1] Minilateral is here understood as being more limited than most multilateral processes, that are often of a more universal character, like the UN. Nordic cooperation would be an example of minilateralism, as it is used here.

### *1.1.2 Security*

The other concept that has been debated for decades in the scholarly literature is security. While it was traditionally seen primarily in relation to defence, it has become common to talk about a broader understanding of security, and concepts like societal and human security, as well as environmental security, have been promoted since the 1990s in security studies (Baldwin, 1995). While there is no common definition of security, there is at least scholarly agreement in this sub-field of international relations that security is about more than state security and territorial defence against military attacks (Buzan et al., 1998; Rieker, 2006). Interestingly, this has not yet—more than 20 years later—become mainstream in European studies. Both in policy circles and in the scholarly literature, most analyses of European security continue to focus on European defence capacity, often ignoring—or at least giving less attention to—the importance of other types of capacity that address broader security challenges.

There is a large literature on the softer sides of the EU's approach, its resilience, and its broader toolbox (Giske, 2021; Tocci, 2020; Joseph & Juncos, 2019; Juncos, 2017; Rieker & Riddervold, 2022). However, most analysis of European security is still rather narrowly focused on the military dimension. While this trend began to change with the COVID-19 pandemic and an increase in cyber threats, hard core defence has returned to the top of the agenda with the Russian full-scale military attack on, and continued war against, Ukraine. However, even though a brutal war is being fought on the European continent and military threats have returned, it does not mean that other types of threats have disappeared. In the current geopolitical context, Western open democratic societies are probably more threatened in other arenas. This also explains why societal resilience has become a priority for the EU and its member states.

Consequently, to fully capture the potential for EU(ropean) strategic autonomy, we need to look beyond traditional security and defence mechanisms. This is why we, in this book, refer to the "broader area" of foreign, security, and defence policy. This area includes not only the EU's formal foreign, security, and defence structure (CFSP and CSDP), but also policy areas and initiatives that both directly and indirectly contribute to the existence of a joint European foreign and security approach. In this broader area we include what is often referred to as "external relations" (trade, energy, climate, development, and humanitarian aid); and

cooperation with members beyond the borders of the EU. The enhanced cooperation with a variety of actors in both the more formal foreign, security, and defence policy, as well as in areas that are not formally part of EU foreign and security policy, contribute to a stronger European actorness, and potentially also strategic autonomy.

However, European security and strategic autonomy even go beyond CFSP/CSDP and external relations. It is also about building resilience against a multitude of non-military threats, such as energy insecurity, cyber-attacks, and pandemics—threats that rarely take national borders into consideration and that can be easier to handle through cooperation (Giske, 2021; Juncos, 2017; Tocci, 2020). Various efforts to strengthen European security in these domains have also been initiated by the EU in close cooperation with its partners. The mechanisms of external security community-building with the enlargement policy and the development of the new European Political Community (EPC) must also be seen as key processes in enhancing EU(ropean) strategic autonomy. These processes look beyond the borders of the EU with the aim of enhancing regional security through cooperation and closer integration with the Union. The result is an increasingly blurred line between EU members and non-members, as many EU partner countries share the same objectives and many of them also participate in EU rules, programmes, initiatives, and policies.

As we will show in this book, applying a broader understanding of both European integration and security will greatly influence how we characterise both the EU and Europe as a security actor. Applying these broader concepts gives a new meaning to strategic autonomy, as it expands on the means through which strategic autonomy is to be achieved, as well as the actors that can help bring it about.

## 1.2 Implications for Our Understanding of European Strategic Autonomy

One direct implication of this conceptualisation of European integration and security is that the aim of building European strategic autonomy does not have to be such an unrealistic objective. In the end it does not allude to anything more than the need for building European capacity in a way that makes the European states better prepared to take care of their own security, and thereby also to become better and more competent allies. Most European states would agree that Europe needs to improve its own

capacity for being able to protect European territory, sovereignty, citizens, and way of life. In the end, this is what strategic autonomy is all about. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has put this at the top of the agenda in all European states. It has forced both of them to think more strategically with regard to European security integration, both within and beyond the borders of the Union.

Without doubt, strategic autonomy has been a contested concept since it was first launched, and even more so after it began to be actively promoted—not only by the Commission, but also by France (Billon-Galland & Whitman, 2021). Scepticism towards, and speculation about, the real intentions behind the French approach are widespread. There is a fear that the concept implies the support for a hidden French agenda that, instead of being directed towards a common interest of the European states, aims at undermining NATO or transatlantic relations (Bora, 2023). While there is no evidence in support of this interpretation, it has become a widely shared belief among some allies—especially those who are most dependent on the US for their national defence. A series of French statements about "NATO being brain dead" (The Economist, 2019) or about the need to make sure that Europe does not become "a vassal of the United States" (Les Echos, 2023) do not help—even though these statements need to be put in context to be fully understood.

Russia's invasion of, and war against, Ukraine shows that NATO is needed more than ever. The recent bid to join from Finland and Sweden are proof of this. But it is needed first and foremost to maintain credible deterrence and territorial defence. While this is crucial, it is not sufficient in the current security context, as it spans broader than military defence. In the end, a strong territorial defence with military capability at the centre cannot protect us against the many types of non-military threats that face our open and technologically advanced democracies. This has become most evident after the recent crises Europe has experienced. These crises have clearly uncovered Europe's vulnerabilities in areas such as health, energy, and cyber, and made it clear that strategic autonomy needs to include much more than territorial defence.

Interestingly, the European Commission is now using the concept in a much broader sense, including most policy areas that may contribute to the protection of European societies, European citizens, and the European way of life (Damen, 2022). In the end, to achieve full strategic autonomy in the current security context, credible territorial defence is a must have, but still far from sufficient. Protection against military

threats and state aggression only paints half the picture, as several threats have now assumed a more hybrid form, whereby misinformation, dependencies, infiltrations, and sabotage by non-liberal/anti-western actors are constant threats to open democratic societies. In such a context, the EU is playing a key role together with associated states and partners.

## 1.3 The Structure of the Book

Building these conceptual clarifications, the next chapter will present a framework for how to study EU(ropean) actorness and assess the state of strategic autonomy, taking all the relevant actors and governance levels into account. It will show how the multi-actor character of (EU)rope can best be studied based on the literature on DI (Chapter 2). In the following three chapters, this framework will be applied to EU(rope)'s role in the world (Chapter 3); to the development of a more autonomous EU(ropean) approach to security and defence policy (Chapter 4); and finally to EU(rope)'s role as a regional actor through mechanisms of external differentiation (Chapter 5).

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