

UK beware: How small Brussels defence schemes suddenly became 'EU Strategic Autonomy'

*Having stealthily but rapidly developed new military structures since 2016, the EU is now openly boasting that it has established an autonomous capacity to conduct EU-led military operations and missions. As **Veterans for Britain** researchers **David Banks** explains, it is no longer possible for UK politicians and officials to deny the EU's military development.*

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At the end of September, eurocrats published a new paper on EU Strategic Autonomy which tantalises MEPs with descriptions of all the new powers the EU has given itself in the realm of defence. While the powers have been around for a couple of years, what is definitely new is the EU's willingness to state publicly that together these powers add up to a new concept in EU military sovereignty.

The glossy paper, *On the Path to Strategic Autonomy*, is written by senior advisers to the EU Parliament who unashamedly trumpet the EU's defence architecture as entirely positive.

While touching lightly on the detail, they casually swat away concerns that the EU is duplicating NATO, creating an alliance within an alliance. Instead, they insist that EU Strategic Autonomy does not weaken NATO, it simply shares the burden

with the US. In any case, they claim EU defence structures and policies now face less resistance from Washington.

It is a curious claim and strikingly disingenuous given that the US Government sent an angry letter to the EU Commission in 2019 decrying new EU Defence structures, particularly those in capability development, as being built to exclude the US with restrictive language and poison pills.

The authors also neglect to mention in their claim of low resistance that there is also a low level of public awareness in Washington, Westminster or most European cities about the EU's complex new defence agreements, which were ram-raided through the EU's political machinery with little fanfare between 2016 and 2018.

Even a cursory analysis of those recent defence agreements would have shown observers in the US and UK that EU Strategic Autonomy has been a recurrent theme. Agreements since 2016 that specifically mention EU strategic autonomy include:

a. EU Council 14 November 2016 agreement, *Conclusions Implementing the EU Global Strategy in the Area of Security and Defence*, which makes six references to the autonomy of EU decision-making, eg:

*These should assist the EU and its Member States in addressing further Europe's current and future security and defence needs, **enhance its strategic autonomy** and strengthen its ability to cooperate with partners.*

b. The *European Defence Action Plan* of 30 November 2016, subsequently confirmed in full by EU Council agreement in December, makes four references to EU strategic autonomy, eg:

As called for by the Council, this European Defence Action Plan contributes to ensuring that the European defence industrial base is able to meet Europe's

*current and future security needs and, in that respect, **enhances the Union's strategic autonomy**, strengthening its ability to act with partners.*

c. Later EU Council agreements, such as the EU Council's 6 March 2017 agreement, *Conclusions on Progress in Implementing the EU Global Strategy in the area of Security and Defence*, refers to decision-making autonomy from NATO, adding:

*In this regard, it calls for further work, in full respect of the principles of inclusiveness, reciprocity and **the autonomy of the EU's decision-making processes**, and to report back on progress in June 2017.*

The EU Council has therefore endorsed strategic autonomy several times, including at all of the EU Council agreements made in response to the 2016 EU Global Strategy and European Defence Action Plan.

The EU gained powers of strategic autonomy not simply by talking about the concept but because the agreements including the ones mentioned above created political-military structures which themselves act as new levers of authority.

These include the MPCC (a headquarters), EU PESCO (structured defence integration programme with its own strict set of rules), the European Defence Fund (central budget to incentivise participation in joint defence capabilities). These and others are held together under a single set of rules the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

That way, the whole chain from designing a gun, through to building it, paying for it, and eventually deploying it on a vehicle and using it in anger are all under the same single process. It is a mutually reinforcing process because participation in one element, incentivised by the piecemeal repayment of member state contributions, requires a political

commitment to the rest.

These structures are best understood by reading another surprisingly honest EU publication, the *EU Concept for Military Command and Control* (EUCMCC), which was published by the EU Council on 23 April 2019 following an official silence procedure. The EUCMCC is a compendium listing the recent preceding EU Council agreements and describing how they form a single organisational framework. (The document is far from being merely an idea, despite what the name concept might suggest.)

Finally, here was a document from the EU admitting its new arrangements would combine to create extraordinary powers, including a central command function for any event the EU Council chooses to designate as a military emergency. The EU could never again claim that these were structures proposed on a hunch by individual member states. The EU Common Security and Defence Policy was now a fully-linked and minutely engineered political ecosystem which had already accrued political consent by increments and is designed to power-up and grow now that it is gaining member state participation and central funds.

The publication of the EUCMCC made it possible to prove to naysayers that the EU had established a command chain, when previously this could only be explained if audiences had the patience to learn how the various jigsaw pieces of preceding agreements fitted together.

It was highly relevant in mid-2019 because the UK-EU Political Declaration contained a UK commitment to stay wholeheartedly under parts of these agreements. Perhaps UK ministers did not know, or could not admit to themselves, that participation in a few aspects would mean inherently a legal commitment to all, as those were the terms of participation when they were agreed soon after the UK referendum

The first line of the EUCMCC gl oats:

The EU has established an autonomus capacity to take decisions to launch and conduct EU-led military operations and missions.

Subsequent pages describe the EU Military Chain of Command which permits *autonomus EU-led Military Operations and Missions* .

For a little more detail on EU Strategic Autonomy, MEPs may turn to a report by the EU Commission s internal defence thinktank, the EU Institute for Security Studies (ISS), published shortly after the last of the main EU defence agreements had been sealed at the EU Council in November 2018.

This report, *Strategic autonomy: towards European sovereignty in defence?* , names the European Defence Fund and PESCO, which were recently furnished with billions of EU funding, as two of the tools of EU strategic autonomy.

Most interestingly, the ISS document seamlessly expands the concept of strategic autonomy from the military realm to other areas of EU influence. In this way, EU strategic defence autonomy is positioned as leverage for Widening the scope of the EU s possibilities in economics, diplomacy and energy.

This is the new context of EU strategic autonomy: the EU views its new defence powers as engrained within its developing role as a global hard-power player.

Any future discussion about UK participation in EU defence programmes will sound innocuous on the surface, but it must be viewed in the context of burgeoning *EU Strategic Autonomy* . For the EU, UK involvement as a rule-taker would be all or nothing.