

Why EU Strategic Autonomy Apart From The U.S. Is Currently Impossible



*James W. Carden - Photo:
Independent Media Institute*

Among the wreckage the riots that have convulsed Paris may leave in their wake include President Emmanuel Macron's pension reform; Macron's ability to effectively govern for the next four years; and, quite possibly, the Fifth Republic itself.

As *The New York Times* [reported](#) in March, protesters have been heard chanting, "Paris Rise Up...We decapitated Louis XVI. We will do it again, Macron."

But another, less noted, casualty of Macron's high-handed attempt to impose a neoliberal "reform" opposed by large pluralities of French citizens, may well be the idea of European strategic autonomy on matters relating to defense and foreign policy.

Hall Gardner, a professor of international relations at the American University of Paris tells me in his view, "Macron saw himself as the mediator between Russia and the West, but Putin's invasion of Ukraine and seeming refusal to compromise hurt Macron's international credibility, while Macron's apparent inability to foresee the extent of French social protest against his proposed reforms in the French system of retirement reveal him to be a weak leader, who is not in touch with his citizens, so that Putin will attempt to play the Far Right and Far Left, and

increasingly the Center, against him, so as to reduce French diplomatic and military support for Ukraine.”

“At the same time,” says Gardner, “the domestic crisis in France is so deep that it will weaken Macron’s efforts to play a constructive role in building an all-European foreign policy vis-a-vis Russia, the U.S. and other states.”

Macron had been pushing the concept of strategic autonomy for years, and during his first campaign for president in 2017 he [pledged](#) to “bring an end to the form of neoconservatism that has been imported to France over the past 10 years.”

From the perspective of American restrainers, this should have been welcome news; after all why, eighty years after the end of the Second World War and thirty years after the end of the Cold War is the United States, with \$31 trillion in debt, still subsidizing the defense of Europe, which has over 100 million more people and a GDP of roughly \$18 trillion?

But then the war in Ukraine came, and with it, a swift and effective effort by the Biden administration—through [any means necessary](#)—to impose a [strict discipline](#) among its NATO allies.

And so, in the aftermath of Putin’s illegal invasion of Ukraine, strategic autonomy’s future began to look bleak and the riots in Paris have now only served to further drive a stake through its heart.

Some might argue, however, that EU leaders are in fact pursuing a strategy of strategic autonomy as a result of the war in Ukraine. After all, European Commissioner for Internal Market [Thierry Breton’s](#) recently [announced](#) plans to transform the European Defense Industry Reinforcement Through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA) into a vehicle through which the EU can meet the new defense requirements for the war in Ukraine. Still more, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, in his much-heralded “[Zeitenwende](#)” (“Turning Point”) speech of last year, pledged €100 billion in new defense spending.

But an increase in spending—something the Americans have, after all, been demanding of its European partners for years—is not an alternative strategy. The fact is, the war in Ukraine has consolidated American hegemony in Europe. Firstly, the financial and military contributions to Ukraine by the United States [dwarfs](#) the contributions made by EU member states.

And then there is the curious non-reaction by the leaders of the Germany parliamentary coalition, the Social Democrats (SPD) to the destruction of Nord Stream 2. As the German sociologist Wolfgang Streeck, emeritus director of the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies recently [wondered](#):

“How long the German government can remain as subservient to the United States as it has now promised to be is an open question, considering the risks that come with Germany’s territorial closeness to the Ukrainian battlefield – a risk not shared by the U.S.”

After conversations with German parliamentarians and activists from across the political spectrum over the past week, one comes away with the impression: Quite a good deal longer.

In Germany, the appetite for a freer hand in the formation of their own national security policy exists in pockets (on the part of the Left that still understands the value of Ostpolitik, and the far-right) but is nowhere evident among the political establishment and still less among Scholz’s coalition partners, particularly the bellicose Greens, who now seem to relish their role as a proxy for the U.S. foreign policy establishment.

Yet over the long term, Germany’s economic, energy and national security interests will likely dictate it come to reject (or take a polite pass on) American demands to sign up for the now looming global confrontation between Western democracies and Eurasian authoritarian regimes led by China and Russia.

Over time, *Ostpolitik* (The “Eastern Policy” of normalized relations with the communist states of Eastern Europe pursued by German Chancellor [Willy Brandt](#) in the late 1960s and early 1970s) may have a second life after all, given the German industry’s dependence on cheap natural gas and its ever-increasing trading ties with China: In 2021 two-way trade between Germany and China hit a [record](#) \$320 billion.

But as things now stand, with Paris distracted by a populist revolt, Washington—with the enthusiastic backing of Warsaw, London, Prague, Riga, Tallinn, Vilnius, *and* the foreign ministry in Berlin—is exercising a kind of hegemony on the continent not seen since the days when President Reagan, against vast popular protests, placed Pershing II missiles in West Germany in late 1983.

To his great credit, Macron realizes—as did his model, the great Charles de Gaulle—that protracted U.S. hegemony over Europe is both unsustainable and indeed, given Washington’s [ever-deepening involvement](#) in the Ukraine war and the new cold war posture it has taken with regard to China, dangerous. But now he is likely helpless to pursue his favored alternative strategy.

In the end, a politically stable France and German buy-in are the two foundational prerequisites for strategic autonomy to succeed. And as of this writing, there is neither.

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