

Spending More, Better, and European? Evaluating Progress toward European Defence Industrial Autonomy

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ABSTRACT

Russia's war in Ukraine has acted as a critical wake-up call for European countries to increase defence spending and modernize their armed forces. At the same time, a parallel ambition has emerged among several European states to enhance strategic autonomy by reducing dependence on the United States, both militarily and industrially. This paper examines whether and how European NATO member states contribute to strengthening European strategic autonomy, with a particular focus on the development of the European defence industrial base.

Despite growing political rhetoric surrounding strategic autonomy, a coherent and actionable roadmap with clearly defined milestones remains largely absent. To address this gap, we employ three conceptualizations of strategic autonomy to assess and compare national levels of ambition: (1) autonomy as responsibility, (2) autonomy as hedging, and (3) autonomy as independence.

Empirically, the study analyses the extent to which states adhere to the three guiding principles articulated by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen: "spend more, spend better, and spend European". Compliance with these principles serves as an indicator of states' commitment to reducing external dependencies.

The findings reveal a persistent tension between short-term capability requirements and long-term strategic objectives. While some European states prioritize immediate needs and maintain strong transatlantic ties, others demonstrate greater commitment to fostering a more autonomous European defence industry. Overall, the results indicate significant divergence among European countries in both ambition and implementation, raising questions about the feasibility of achieving a unified and robust European defence industrial autonomy.

Bios

Marion Bogers, PhD, is an assistant professor of Defense Economics at the Faculty of Military Sciences, Netherlands Defense Academy. Her current research interests include burden sharing within the European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organization, performance management, defense capabilities and European strategic autonomy. She has published numerous articles in peer-reviewed journals and books.

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