



STRATEGIC BRIEF

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TÜRKİYE AND THE EUROPEAN STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

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By **Denis Verret**, Vice-President of EuroDefense-France, Scientific Committee Member of Institut du Bosphore

Key points & Outlook

Since 2013, Europe has consistently affirmed its ambition for “strategic autonomy”, sometimes resorting to other slogans such as “strategic sovereignty” or “strategic responsibility”, but these are essentially synonymous. Does Türkiye, a candidate to join the European Union, share this ambition? First and foremost for itself? This seems to be the case in its own practice, without actually using the term. And if so, can or should these respective ambitions for strategic autonomy converge? Is this essential issue the blind spot in our relations? Shouldn’t it now be essential in the face of the chaos created by the malignant convergence of the governance of Trump and Putin, which threatens Ukraine, Europe, and the Atlantic Alliance itself?

Shouldn’t every opportunity be seized to further explore the question of this potential convergence and its current concrete implications? Such as the most inclusive possible composition of the “coalition of willing and capable states” against the threats we face and will face in the future? Bilateral meetings between Türkiye and any other state concerned by the new collective defence of Europe, meetings between Türkiye and the EU and the framework of the EPC (European Politic Community) should address this issue of the shareable ambition of strategic autonomy and the means required to implement it.

“Knowing others is intelligence; knowing yourself is true wisdom.” Lao Tzu.

Who has become “the other”? Putin is no longer the sole master of the clocks, those ticking behind the latest global shocks. Putin and Trump allied? Trump is indeed unpredictable, and Putin is predictable. Is Trump in Putin’s thrall or just in his own hands, in his ‘ego-system’? And we, who are we, when confronted like this? Our question defines the scope of our strategic autonomous response, to be able to rely on our own strengths, in the face of a Russian threat that we would each and all judge to be “out there”.

In an interview with Unherd (April 14, 2025), U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance declared: “It’s not good for Europe to be the permanent vassal of the United States in terms of security”. On April 12, 2023, French President Emmanuel Macron had declared, invoking the ambition of European strategic autonomy, that being an “ally” of the United States does not mean being a “vassal”.

For many years, France’s position towards the United States has been “aligned, but not aligned”. If we were to characterize Türkiye’s stance, we’d be tempted to go one step further: “non-aligned, but aligned”.

Strategic autonomy does not mean autarky or isolation, but rather solid alliances to reduce dependency: isn’t ‘derisking’ the watchword of the day? Ambassador Kanwal Sibal, former Foreign Affairs Secretary of India, sums it up well when he talks about India: “we have to preserve our strategic autonomy to the extent possible, though no country in a globalised system that is based on interdependence can maintain full strategic autonomy”.

Europe consistently asserts its ambition for strategic autonomy, sometimes qualifying it as “open” to ward off from criticism of protectionism or isolationism.

Türkiye was, at one time, caricatured for its “splendid isolation”. While it does not seem to officially invoke the concept of strategic autonomy, it appears to be actively implementing it — rather like Monsieur Jourdain in Molière’s *The Bourgeois Gentleman*, speaking prose without realizing it. This raises the question of the possible convergence of these parallel ambitions. Can they, and should they, be further aligned in the chaotic international context provoked by the combined malignant governance of both Putin and Trump?

Strategic autonomy, an asserted European ambition

Six years after the signing of the Lisbon Treaty in December 2007, the European Council, for the first time in late 2013, stated the objective of “increasing its strategic autonomy”. And in 2016, the European Union’s Global Strategy affirmed its “ambition for strategic autonomy”.

In his Sorbonne speech on September 26, 2017, President Macron relied more on the term European sovereignty more than strategic autonomy. But in essence, the two ambitions are synonymous. It could be argued that other terms basically reflect the same underlying goal: strategic responsibility, geopolitical Europe, all-round security, resilience, reduced dependencies, derisking, European preference, etc. The ambition is clear; the real question now is the gradual implementation of that ambition.

Two weeks after the start of Russia’s renewed aggression against Ukraine, taking note of the Ukraine’s application for EU membership, the Versailles Declaration of the informal meeting of EU Heads of State or Government on March 10 and 11, 2022 constituted “a joint commitment to strengthening European sovereignty in military, energy and economic matters, committing ourselves to reducing our strategic dependence, particularly in the following most sensitive areas: Critical raw materials/ Semiconductors/ Health/ Digital/ Food products”.

In the process, the Strategic Compass was adopted by the unanimous agreement of all 27 EU countries in the European Council, on March 24–25, 2022: “It will strengthen the EU’s strategic autonomy and its ability to work with its partners to safeguard its values and interests.”

The Joint Communication of March 5, 2024 “A new European Defence Strategy” (EDIS), which led to the European Defence Industrial Programme (EDIP, currently under discussion), further rearticulates this ambition: “Geopolitical developments underline the imperative need for Europe to assume greater strategic responsibility for its own security, in particular to assist key partners such as Ukraine”.

Subsequently, on September 9, 2024, the Draghi Report emphasized that the defence sector is “critical to ensuring Europe’s strategic autonomy in facing external threats while stimulating innovation through spillover effects on the economy as a whole.” Indeed, the Polish EU presidency for the 1st half of 2025 has focused on strengthening seven dimensions of European security:

- defence and security
- protection of people and borders
- resistance to foreign interference and disinformation
- security and entrepreneurial freedom
- energy transition
- competitive and resilient agriculture
- health security.

Finally, during the mid-March 2025 presentation of the European Defence Package (White Paper on European Defence and the ‘ReArm Europe – Preparing for 2030’ Plan), Commissioner for Defence and Space Andrius Kubilius emphasized: “It’s not just about military power, but about our preparedness, our strategic autonomy and Europe’s future as a global actor”.

As a candidate to join the European Union, Türkiye is directly concerned by this European ambition for strategic autonomy. But does it share this European ambition?

Could this essential topic be a blind spot in our relations? Shouldn’t it naturally impose itself in Türkiye’s diplomatic exchanges with its various European partners, and with the EU itself? Shouldn’t it also be addressed within the framework of the European Political Community (EPC), which was designed to be inclusive of all countries on the European continent in the broadest sense, but explicitly excluding Russia and Belarus? Wouldn’t Türkiye benefit from offering to host a forthcoming session of the EPC, with the aim of raising precisely this structuring issue of European strategic autonomy, and the potential convergence with its own path toward strategic autonomy?

The ambition of strategic autonomy implies a critical scale

The concept of strategic autonomy was introduced in France in the 1994 White Paper on Defence. At the time, it had a national dimension, with the archetypal model being France’s nuclear deterrent, which could only be conceived as fully autonomous from its American ally. The essential link between ballistic capabilities and launchers contributed to the European policy of “autonomous access to space”.

But if strategic autonomy means choosing one’s dependencies and aiming to reduce them as soon as they risk becoming excessive, in the knowledge that they are never stabilized and have a tendency to worsen, it implies in any case a critical scale, a European dimension rather than merely national. And beyond the affirmation of ambition, it requires progressive implementation.

How does Türkiye view this question of critical scale?

All the indications are that, on its own scale, Türkiye is logically seeking to reduce its dependencies and diversify its partnerships; but does it share our conviction that the pursuit of critical scale justifies reinforcing our essential partnerships with our allies, first and foremost European and -if always or still possible- American, but also beyond, the famous like-minded partners? This question takes on a whole new, dramatic dimension when Trump suggests that the United States might fail to defend Ukraine, a country we consider essential to our own collective security, or even to keep the Atlantic alliance, of which they are the backbone.

The “Game Changer”: Trump, now sharing the mastery of clocks with Putin, destabilizes the Atlantic Alliance

In Putin’s narrative, NATO, cast as the aggressor, is to be dislocated! Europe is to be divided and, ultimately, the former hyper soft power, the United States, now turned today’s “ally”, is to be profoundly weakened. Admittedly, Trump’s massive concessions, which we cannot help but fear, would deserve some transactions. But there shall be no illusions: Trump will not succeed in weakening the Russian-Chinese relationship, whose essential target is to weaken the United States and the West.

Concerned about avoiding a catastrophic scenario, the Europeans, along with strategic partners such as Canada, have responded by assuming greater responsibility for the Alliance’s collective defence, and by finally investing heavily in their own defence capabilities. They propose to strengthen NATO’s European pillar, or even to “Europeanize” it. France and the United Kingdom invite their partners to build a “coalition of the willing” to create a reassurance force to bolster Ukraine’s resistance, including through the deployment of troops on Ukrainian soil. To be able to rely on one’s own forces, in case of

US withdrawal – is that not the most concrete expression of Europe's need for strategic autonomy? But now, at a greater scale, by associating other major European and even non-European countries with the EU's cause, anxious not to fall under the double yoke of Putin and Trump.

How is Türkiye responding to this new environment?

The United States has always rightly regarded Türkiye as an essential NATO ally, and Türkiye has always regarded NATO - and thus its strategic relationship with the United States - as an essential element in its own security.

While preserving its dialogue and interests with Russia, and its own possible role as mediator, Türkiye has condemned Russia's intervention in Ukraine, supplied Kiev with drones of considerable military impact, and consistently advocated for the Ukraine membership of NATO, which would clearly serve as Ukraine's best guarantee against future Russian aggression toward its territory and independence. Against a backdrop of uncertainty surrounding Trump's continued support for Ukraine, the extent of US commitments in Europe, and even the future of the Atlantic Alliance, Türkiye has indicated its willingness to join a peacekeeping mission on the contact line between Ukrainian and Russian forces in eastern Ukraine- provided Moscow agrees. And will it require a US backstop to go further? Nothing is settled: are Moscow's approval and Washington's safety net red lines for Ankara?

President Erdogan's recent statement on April 11, the first day of the annual Antalya Diplomacy Forum could contain a more structuring vision: « It's becoming increasingly impossible for a Europe of which Türkiye is not included as it deserves to be, to continue its existence as a global player. To put it bluntly : European security without Türkiye is unthinkable ». The coalition of the willing for the defence of Ukraine and the European collective defence must examine the possible convergence of its strategic interests with those of

Türkiye in this new geopolitical environment created by Putin and Trump. Indeed, Türkiye would be essential to the consolidation of our collective defence and deterrence capacity against an aggressor who is unlikely to stop unless effectively deterred. As in the case of the United Kingdom, this would entail the necessary convergence to strengthen Europe's Industrial and Technological Base in the broadest sense, and share the objective of "European preference", just as there is an "American preference" in the United States itself. In this context, the possible selection of the European Fighter Aircraft (EFA) equipped with the Meteor air-to-air missile, considered the best in its category, would be a strong signal of a concrete convergence with Europe on strategic autonomy: it would mean diversifying from current U.S. fighter jet solutions (which come with technological and capability restrictions) by turning to a European aircraft- until Türkiye's own fifth-generation fighter, Kaan, is ready. The EFA is the fruit of cooperation among 3 EU countries (Germany, Italy, Spain) and a now non-member European state, the UK, equipped with a missile, the Meteor built by 6 European countries (the previous 4 plus France and Sweden) to arm the 3 European fighter aircraft (Rafale and Gripen in addition to the EFA). London, the originator of the project Meteor, led this European program so as not to make the export of EFA dependent on authorizations from the American Congress: that says it all!

In other words, Türkiye can take its rightful place alongside us in our ambition for strategic autonomy, one that would then become truly shared.

That said, it is worth emphasizing that our preferred scenario remains one in which the United States respects the NATO Treaty — in particular, the well-known Article 5, but also Article 2, which states: "The Parties will seek to eliminate conflict in their international economic policies..." But in this scenario, both of NATO's pillars — the European and the American — would be endowed with strategic autonomy?

DENIS VERRET

Denis Verret was born in 1949 in Paris, France. He started his professional career in 1976, joining the Ministry of Public Facilities (Town Planning Regulation Office first, and later Architectural Consultancy Office). From 1981 to 1983, Denis Verret was posted to the French Embassy in Washington DC as Commercial Counsellor, before coming back to Paris as Technical Advisor (in charge of International and Regional Affairs) of the Minister of Industry and Research Laurent Fabius. In 1984, he was appointed as Deputy Diplomatic Counsellor (in charge of International Economic Affairs) to the cabinet of the Prime Minister Laurent Fabius. In 1986, Denis Verret joined the Thomson Group, where he took the position of Executive Vice President within Thomson International in charge of Western Europe. His area was progressively enlarged, before his appointment as Deputy Director of Thomson CSF International. In 1994 he joined Aerospatiale 1994 as Corporate Vice President in charge of International and Commercial Affairs and Member of the Executive Committee. In June 1999 Denis Verret was appointed President of Aerospatiale Matra Lagardère International before taking on the position of Senior Vice President Political Affairs France at the creation of EADS in 2000 up to end 2007. Since 2003, he was also in charge of Coordination and Support, EADS International. From early 2008, Denis Verret has been appointed Senior Vice President Strategic Business and International Relations in the Strategy and Marketing Organisation (SMO) of EADS. From July 2010 up to end 2021, Denis Verret operated his own company DV-Conseil, as a consultant in international, institutional and strategic affairs. He was mainly involved in aerospace and energy domains.

He is currently Vice-President of EuroDefense-France, Scientific Committee Member of Institut du Bosphore and Board Member of Comité France-Turquie.

Following the Paris Institute of Political Science (1971), Denis Verret passed a Master's degree in Public Law before joining (1974 - 1976) the French National School of Administration (ENA). In 1986, he followed the Program for Management Development (PMD) at the Harvard Business School. He served in the French Navy in 1973.



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