



## After Afghanistan and AUKUS: What next for European defence?

by Sophia Besch and Luigi Scazzieri, 7 October 2021

**The US retreat from Afghanistan and the AUKUS deal have strengthened calls for greater ‘European strategic autonomy’. Many member-states remain sceptical, but Europeans should prepare themselves for a world where the US is less involved.**

This summer’s [US withdrawal from Afghanistan](#) and the subsequent announcement of the AUKUS submarine deal should show Europeans three things. First, the US is re-orienting its foreign policy away from Europe and focusing on the Indo-Pacific region and China. Second, European military operations remain painfully dependent on US military capabilities and decisions. And third, the Biden administration is not interested in the views of its European allies: it informs them of its decisions, but it does not consult them in advance. The question is what lessons Europe should draw from these events.

The European presence in Afghanistan always depended on the US military’s logistical and intelligence support. After the Afghan government collapsed, Europeans lacked the capabilities to secure Kabul Airport by themselves. Few would have wanted to stay much longer. But the Biden administration advanced the date of the American withdrawal and started moving out troops with short notice, forcing the Europeans to end their own evacuations.

The Afghanistan withdrawal was followed by the announcement of a deal between the US, UK and Australia to launch a strategic partnership, known as AUKUS, implicitly intended to counter China and underpinned by a deal for Australia to acquire nuclear submarines. AUKUS meant that Canberra tore up [a previous €56 billion deal to buy French submarines](#). Paris was furious, partly because its agreement collapsed, but mainly because it had been left in the dark about the negotiation of the AUKUS deal. French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian called the agreement [a ‘stab in the back’](#) and France recalled its ambassadors to the US and Australia for consultations, while postponing a planned Franco-British defence summit. The EU was also embarrassed: the AUKUS deal was announced one day before the Union was scheduled to launch a new [strategy](#) for the Indo-Pacific, in which the EU said it wanted to deepen engagement with countries with interests in the region – including Australia, the UK and the US.

Even before the AUKUS announcement, Europe’s impotence in Afghanistan had led some European politicians and officials to call for the EU to develop ‘strategic autonomy’ – a phrase used in European foreign and security policy debates to refer to the Union’s ability to carry out military operations

without the US. French President Emmanuel Macron and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte [called on the EU](#) to take on more responsibility in security and defence. In her State of the Union speech on September 15<sup>th</sup>, EU Commission president Von der Leyen [said that Europe should be able to do more on its own](#). She suggested setting up a 'European Defence Union' and said she would convene a 'European defence summit' in the first half of 2022, together with France, which will hold the EU's rotating Presidency at that time. EU High Representative for Foreign Policy and Security Affairs Josep Borrell and [others](#) have been more specific and called for the EU to set up an 'initial entry force' that could intervene rapidly in situations like the evacuation from Kabul – an idea first [proposed by 14 member-states in May](#).

This summer's events clearly show that the tensions in transatlantic relations raised forcefully during the Trump presidency essentially remain the same under Biden. The US is not 'back' in a meaningful way. Biden may have visited Europe for meetings with NATO and the EU, and told the Munich Security Conference that "America is back", but Washington is becoming increasingly disengaged from Europe. It is likely that in future it may not fully share European priorities; it may even have wholly different ones.

Europe is likely to run into two obstacles as it tries to develop the defence capabilities needed to act independently of the US. First, the push for European strategic autonomy remains divisive. Few governments have been willing to openly criticise the US for the way in which it conducted its withdrawal from Afghanistan. And the European response to France's rage about the AUKUS deal has been muted, with Paris receiving little sympathy from other states (even if some are privately critical of the US for triggering a row among allies). Many member-states [remain sceptical](#) of strategic autonomy, particularly the Baltic states and Poland, which see Russia as the main threat facing them, view their security as tightly linked to the US and do not want to take actions that they think might undermine NATO and hurt relations with Washington. Germany, for its part, is keen to keep the US close and avoid divisions in Europe. Member-states agree that they should build up Europe's military capabilities, but are wary of doing so under the banner of strategic autonomy. The concept will remain unhelpful so long as it is seen by many as anti-American.

The second issue is that the EU is trying to push strategic autonomy forward by essentially doubling down on existing initiatives, such as the flawed idea of an initial entry force. Many of its proponents regard the withdrawal from Afghanistan as strengthening the rationale for creating this force. The debate risks re-opening the debate over a 'European army', and fails to address bigger underlying issues: Europe's lack of capabilities, readiness and a common strategic outlook. These problems bedevilled similar efforts in the past. Since 2007 the EU has been able to call upon 'battlegroups', military units of 1500 soldiers provided by member-states. But battlegroups have never been used. First, they are too small to be deployed in most hostile environments. Second, Europe lacks the military capabilities to carry out complex operations without US support. Third, member-states have been unable to agree on using battlegroups. The troops committed to EU battlegroups are provided by member-states, whose approval is needed to deploy them.

At 5000 soldiers, the proposed initial entry force would be larger than the battlegroups and therefore would potentially be more credible even in conflict settings. Member-states would be forced to keep some military units at higher levels of readiness to contribute to the force, and exercises would foster greater interoperability between national forces. But an initial entry force could not be fully operational unless member-states were able to provide all the capabilities it needed – which they cannot. In Afghanistan and in the 2011 Libya conflict, Europeans depended on the Americans for airlift capabilities, aerial refuelling and drones to provide intelligence and carry out reconnaissance. In the Sahel, European

troops still rely on the US for these services. Moreover, decisions on the entry force's deployment would remain fraught with difficulties, because the force would be unusable if member-states who were contributing troops disagreed. Given the likely difficulty in reaching consensus, if some European countries wanted to launch a military operation without NATO, it is far more likely that they would act through a coalition of the willing, using a national headquarters.

Recycling old initiatives and hoping that member-states will finally find the political will to make them successful is not a promising strategy. The lack of member-state commitment that currently undermines EU defence initiatives like the initial entry force is not necessarily permanent. Fundamental changes in EU policy can of course happen, as in 2020, when the pandemic prompted EU leaders to finally agree to issue joint debt. For some European governments, the summer of Afghanistan and AUKUS will have a similar rallying effect. But not all leaders share the same sense of urgency to take a leap of faith on EU defence. In the meantime, what can Europeans do to speed up the necessary shift?

For one thing, they should not abandon ambitious concepts altogether. Instead, European countries sceptical of the French pitch for strategic autonomy should work to come up with a counter-proposal, such as a European defence strategy that accommodates the threat perceptions of Central and Eastern European member-states and explicitly includes a role for NATO.

There is room for such a proposal. A more explicitly pro-EU centre-left government in Berlin may want to strengthen the relationship with France and might invest more capital in EU initiatives (though it will probably not raise German defence spending). Even in the UK Conservative Party, which very rarely criticises the US, some are coming round to the view that US and UK interests will not always be aligned, and that the UK should co-operate more closely with its neighbours in ensuring Europe's security. The Biden administration is [not opposed](#) to a European defence complementary to NATO – the US has joined an EU project to make it easier to move military forces across Europe, is negotiating an agreement with the European Defence Agency and has agreed to launch a US-EU dedicated dialogue on security and defence. But while Washington may encourage European efforts, working out how to make them successful is not high on its list of priorities.

In the future, Europeans will need to define their own security interests and priorities. The EU is currently working on a 'strategic compass', which is [supposed to set out what the EU wants to do in the field of security](#), how it should do it, and what capabilities it needs. The compass, a strategic document developed through consultation between member-states, will be completed in early 2022, under the French presidency. The process of drawing it up is supposed to give all member-states a more common foreign policy outlook. But achieving this will be a slow process, meaning that member-states will need to continue to have difficult strategic conversations even after the strategic compass has been formally completed.

Once they agree on meaningful common priorities, Europeans will need to implement them. Much capability development will take place outside the EU in smaller groups of member-states, as it always has. This has the advantage of potentially involving non-EU states like the UK – especially important in the aftermath of the AUKUS deal, which has further soured relations between London and Paris. But to fill crucial capability gaps and avoid duplication, member-states need to co-ordinate capability development. Initiatives like the EU's co-ordinated annual review on defence can in the future help match groups of countries and their defence companies with capability gaps. Through financial incentives like the European Defence Fund, the EU can play a useful role in encouraging more co-operation in developing capabilities. Similarly, efforts to foster interoperability between military forces

and to launch joint operations will take place both in the EU, for example through Common Security and Defence Policy operations, but also in other frameworks, such as NATO or coalitions of the willing.

Even if member-states follow this script, it will be years before they can handle their own security without US support. Even leaving aside the US nuclear deterrent in Europe, it takes time and money to fill capability gaps. But under the current US administration (as under its predecessor), Europeans can no longer rely on transatlantic co-ordination 'by default'. If they want to be heard in Washington, Europeans will have to speak with one voice, and show that they can contribute to common security, not just rely on American power. The US-EU defence dialogue may prove a useful forum to discuss issues such as continued US logistical and intelligence support for European troops in the Sahel, while Europeans work on filling capability gaps; more research and development co-operation through NATO; US participation in more EU defence projects; or more intelligence exchanges across the Atlantic.

In the aftermath of the Afghanistan debacle and the AUKUS deal, it is unsurprising that many Europeans want to become more capable of acting without US support. There are many reasons to be sceptical of swift progress. But once the dust settles, Europeans may realise that they can no longer count on the US to solve their problems. This realisation should prompt them to invest in defence and work together more closely, both in capability development and in operational terms. Europe can hope for encouragement from Washington – a more capable Europe will be good for NATO, too – but should not expect much US guidance. It is up to Europeans [to create a more solid basis for a renewed transatlantic defence partnership](#), or to survive with less US help, if they have to.

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