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The European Union's Strategic Autonomy: The Pursuit of Power-over-Itself and Actorness

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The European Union's Strategic Autonomy: The Pursuit of Power-over-Itself and Actorness

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Abstract

The significance of strategic autonomy, a notion that concerns the European Union's (EU) global role and its ability to act autonomously, has increased, largely due to Russia's war against Ukraine. Because of its allusion to the EU's global role, strategic autonomy also pertains to its power, prompting this paper to explore the notion of strategic autonomy with regard to the EU's power. However, due to its *sui generis* nature, characterising the EU's power is notoriously challenging. Firstly, Galtung's (1973) distinction between power-over-others and power-over-oneself is employed to demonstrate that strategic autonomy primarily concerns the latter, in contrast to Helwig (2022) who implicitly argues that it involves the former. Secondly, this thesis argues that strategic autonomy is an effort to achieve actorness, a notion that establishes criteria for an actor's ability to act, in turn facilitating the projection of power. Third, in regard to its power-over-others, the concept indicates an objective by the EU to increase its hard power, or punitive power in Galtung's (1973) terms. Through the pursuit of power-over-itself and actorness, strategic autonomy represents a clear direction in terms of the EU's global role, namely the quest of escaping its enigmatic character and becoming a 'normal' international actor.

Keywords: European Union, Strategic Autonomy, Power, EU's Global Role, Power-over-Oneself, Actorness

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Abstract | 2 |
| Table of Contents | 3 |
| Introduction | 3 |
| 1. Power-over-Itself | 8 |
| 1.1. A Galtungian Approach to Power | 9 |
| 1.2. The Europe-as-a-power Debate | 12 |
| 1.3. Breaking out of the Debate: A Response to Helwig (2022) | 15 |
| 1.4. Strategic Autonomy as the EU's Power-over-itself | 18 |
| 2. Actorness | 20 |
| 2.1. Theoretically Deconstructing Strategic Autonomy | 21 |
| 2.2. Assessing the European Union's Actorness | 23 |
| 2.3. External Changes in Actorness | 26 |
| 2.4. Strategic Autonomy as a Pursuit of Actorness | 28 |
| 3. Safeguarding Soft Power and Developing Hard Power | 29 |
| 3.1. European Union Global Strategy | 30 |
| 3.2. Strategic Compass | 31 |
| 3.3. Speech by Josep Borrell (HR/VP) | 33 |
| 3.4. Speech by Charles Michel (President of European Council) | 34 |
| 3.5. Strategic Autonomy to Safeguard Soft Power and Increase Hard Power | 36 |
| Conclusion | 38 |
| Bibliography | 40 |

Introduction

The European Union (EU) is often characterised as a *sui generis* – something of its own kind. Rather than being described as a state in the traditional Westphalian sense, it can be portrayed as a post-national polity (Helwig and Sinkkonen 2022), a ‘supranational federation’ (von Bogdandy 2013) or a ‘regional international society’ (Jovanovic and Kristensen 2015). In other words, the EU is an ‘unidentified political object’ that shares some – but not all – similarities with conventional states (Rhinard and Sjöstedt 2019: 4). In contrast to ordinary states such as the United States and China, the EU lacks, for instance, a unified military force (Duke 2018) and operates on the principle of *shared* sovereignty among its member states (Bickerton et al 2022). From these viewpoints, it is evident that the EU can not be categorised as a ‘normal’ international actor.

With a population of approximately 500 million people and an economy that is the third largest in the world after the United States and China, one would expect – despite its elusive nature – that the EU would, in some way, be influential in international affairs. Yet, it is not clear, perhaps as a result of its enigmatic character, in *what way* the Union is influential or *what kind* of power it projects. In the early 1990s, Mark Eyskens, a former Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs, described it as an ‘economic giant, a political dwarf and a military worm’ (quoted in Leonard 2018). More recently, *The Economist* (2023) presented the EU as ‘a construct perfectly adept at standardising phone chargers, but one that scarcely matters when it comes to high politics’. In spite of these gloomy portrayals of the EU’s role in world politics, this ‘unidentified political object’ has undergone significant change over the years, affording the possibility to alter this bleak outlook. The Treaty of Lisbon, for instance, which established the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), represented a momentous shift with regard to the EU’s role as an international actor (Järvenpää et al 2019), challenging Eyskens’ description of the Union as a ‘military worm’, and causing further bickering regarding the way in which to characterise its power.

The question of the EU’s power is complicated by the fact that it is made up of 27 member states, resulting in a perception of the Union as a conglomerate of actors rather than being one coherent strategic actor (Bento 2022). As a result of this, essentially stemming from its *sui generis* nature, the EU does not fit within existing classifications of great powers (Palm

2021). In attempting to define the EU's global role, scholars have produced at least fifteen different conceptualisations: 'Civilian Power Europe' (Duchêne 1972), 'Ethical Power Europe' (Aggestam 2008), 'Liberal Power Europe' (Wagner 2017), 'Realist Power Europe' (Zimmermann 2007), 'Market Power Europe' (Damro 2012) and 'Normative Power Europe' (Manners 2002), to name a few. With regard to the number of references in scholarly literature, 'Normative Power Europe' has dominated the so-called *Europe-as-a-power debate* (Wagner 2017). This refers to a conception of the EU's power as ideational, in contrast to material, rooted in norms and values as opposed to military might, and its ability to shape conceptions of the 'normal' in international affairs. A core assumption of this debate, and, indeed, this thesis, is that the EU can be perceived as a coherent strategic actor. The sheer number of conceptualisations of the EU's power highlights the challenges involved in characterising it, a task further complicated by the introduction of the concept of *strategic autonomy*.

In recent years the notion of European strategic autonomy has become something of a buzzword in Brussels. At its core, it pertains to the EU's *ability to act autonomously* in critical policy areas (European Parliament 2022), and an 'ability to think for oneself and to act according to one's own values and interests' (EEAS 2020). To act autonomously refers, in turn, to a position of not being dependent on other countries in these policy sectors. Although it has primarily been given attention in the context of security- and defence policy, strategic autonomy has managed to 'travel' and 'stretch' to include a wide array of policy areas including trade, technology and health (Csernatonì 2023); yet, an illustrative example is the way in which the EU is dependent – through NATO – on the United States in the context of defence, which is considered such a strategically important policy area. In practice, this has, for instance, resulted in the implementation of defence projects such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) and the European Defence Fund (EDF) (Bargués 2021). Projects such as these have been developed to nurture the capacity to act autonomously. In essence, then, the notion concerns the Union's dependencies. Accordingly, strategic autonomy can be presented as the political, institutional and material ability of the EU to manage its dependence, with a capacity to implement self-determined policy decisions as its primary objective (Helwig and Sinkkonen 2022).

Although the notion of strategic autonomy has, in recent years, become a buzzword in Brussels, it is far from being a novel idea. In the post-Cold war setting of the Anglo-French Saint-Malo Declaration, signed in December 1998, it was stated that ‘[t]he Union must have the capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces, the means to decide to use them, and a readiness to do so, in order to respond to international crises’ (quoted in Helwig and Sinkkonen 2022: 3), ultimately leading to the creation of the CSDP with the Lisbon Treaty in 2009 (Koppa 2022). Although the spirit of the notion can be traced back to Saint-Malo, it was not until 2013 that ‘European strategic autonomy’ was used for the first time as a formal concept by the Foreign Affairs Council of the European Union (Tocci 2021).

With regard to the history of the notion, Helwig and Sinkkonen (2022) identify four waves of the strategic autonomy debate, shedding light on the external challenges that the EU has faced in its ability to act autonomously. The initial wave that emerged in the 1990s and which led to the Saint-Malo Declaration, primarily dealt with the issue of European military capabilities in the event of U.S. disengagement from Brussels. The second wave came in the 2010s, spurred by conflicts and crises in countries such as Libya and Syria, causing the EU to advocate for strategic autonomy as a basis for its ability to promote peace beyond its borders. The onset of the third wave was marked by the election of President Donald Trump in 2016, which revived concerns about Washington’s commitment to European security. The subsequent decline of U.S. hegemony and great-power rivalry with China coupled with the Brexit referendum led to a sense of fragmentation of global and regional orders (Michaels 2023), while the fourth wave emerged following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic (Helwig and Sinkkonen 2022). The return of war to the European continent in Ukraine, with which it became evident that the EU relied too heavily on Russian energy, impeding its ability to act autonomously, has renewed attention to achieving strategic autonomy, arguably constituting a fifth wave.

Despite these attempts at grasping the concept of strategic autonomy, there is no universally accepted definition (Helwig and Sinkkonen 2022). Scholars lament, in this context, that it is a ‘hotly contested notion’ (Koppa 2022: 33), an incoherent concept (Helwig and Sinkkonen 2022) that is divisive and fuzzy (Järvenpää et al 2019), surprisingly imprecise (Bento 2022) with ‘as many misunderstandings about the project as there are elements of clarity’ (Howorth 2018: 524). Strategic autonomy should therefore, according to Helwig and Sinkkonen (2022),

instead be viewed as a concept that serves as a *comprehensive framework* within which the analysis of the future of the EU's global role takes place.

Strategic autonomy should be understood as a notion that has the potential to reveal in *what way* the EU attempts to be influential and *what kind* of power it attempts to possess. The current President of the European Council, Charles Michel (2020), admits that European strategic autonomy is, indeed, conflated with that of its sovereignty and power. Because it serves as an essential cornerstone of the Union's ambition to 'strengthen its role and influence in the world' (EEAS 2020) and 'represents a guiding light for a more consequential EU global role' (Tocci 2021: 7), power can be posited as the central issue of the strategic autonomy debate (Beaucillon 2023; Palm 2021).

This thesis explores the intersection between the EU's pursuit of strategic autonomy and its power. A general lack of academic reflections on the notion (Helwig and Sinkkonen 2022), coupled with a specific lack of engagement with the connection between strategic autonomy and the EU's power, provide an incentive for further investigation. The fact that the notion of strategic autonomy, which clearly concerns the EU's global role, has not been sufficiently connected to the understanding of the Union's power, in this way, forms the puzzle of this thesis. More specifically, it asks: how should the notion of strategic autonomy be understood with regard to the EU's power?

Helwig (2022) offers an investigation specifically focused on the connection between strategic autonomy and power. In employing the Europe-as-a-power debate as the theoretical framework, he discusses the notion vis-à-vis three common conceptualisations of the EU's global role, namely 'Market Power Europe' (MPE), 'Normative Power Europe' (NPE) and Europe as a 'Realist Power' (RPE), arguing that strategic autonomy serves as a reference point for objectives relating to all these forms of power, rather than triggering an orientation towards a specific type of power. Consequently, strategic autonomy is stated to increase the ambiguity of the EU's global role.

The core argument of this thesis is that strategic autonomy, on the contrary, provides a *clear direction* in terms of the EU's global role. It is an active effort to evolve beyond its role as an 'unidentified political object' to increasingly resemble a 'normal' international actor, akin to conventional actors such as the United States and China. In the context of its power, the EU

wants to achieve this aim in two ways, with each of the thesis' first two chapters dedicated to one of the two prescribed objectives. In essence, this involves a concept analysis, in which attention is directed to how a notion (strategic autonomy), with the most narrowly construed definitions of it, is situated within a broader theoretical discussion (about power) (Berenskoetter 2017). In the first chapter, the argument is put forward that the EU aspires to achieve a specific form of power, also contradicting Helwig (2022), namely *power-over-itself*, a notion that refers to 'the ability to set goals that are one's own', established by Galtung (1973: 34) in his framework of power. This stands in contrast to approaching the strategic autonomy-power nexus through the Europe-as-a-power debate which, on the other hand, deals with the EU's *power-over-others*. The second chapter puts forth the claim that the EU's effort to achieve strategic autonomy represents a pursuit of *actorness*, a concept that relates to an actor's ability to act, requiring power-over-oneself, in turn, facilitating the projection of power(-over-others).

The third chapter provides an empirical analysis of two strategic documents and two speeches produced by EU politicians in leadership positions within the framework of strategic autonomy, examining the EU's references to power in this context, and engaging with the notions of 'power-over-oneself' and 'actorness'. The motivation behind this is to pay attention to the relationship between the concept (strategic autonomy) and the context (the EU's political discourse on power) (Berenskoetter 2017). In other words, strategic autonomy functions as a concept that brings light to the way in which the EU perceives its own power, corresponding to Friedrich Nietzsche's (quoted in Devetak 2013: 188) statement: 'when we say something about the world we also inevitably say something about our conception of the world'. It is in this way that this paper takes a Culture and Politics-perspective. That is, 'culture is a way of seeing things, a way of thinking' (Engelke 2018: 27), thus, different notions of power are, in some way, cultural perspectives. This chapter reveals that the EU's power-over-others is, indeed, also a constitutive element of the quest for strategic autonomy, claiming that the Union attempts to safeguard its existing soft power by increasing its hard power, in turn demonstrating that the latter is underpinning the notion of strategic autonomy. In developing its defence capabilities, the EU aspires to acquire the abilities which currently sets it apart from 'normal' international actors. Importantly, however, 'power-over-itself' and 'actorness' are concepts better suited to capture the essence of strategic autonomy, serving, in turn, as platforms for the projection of power-over-others.

1. Power-over-Itself

Running parallel to the connection that this thesis explores, namely the one between strategic autonomy and the EU's power, Helwig (2022) offers a similar investigation. In this pursuit, he analyses the potential power that strategic autonomy could entail through the Europe-as-a-power debate which seeks to characterise what *kind of power* the EU projects, arguing that strategic autonomy serves as a reference point for objectives relating to several forms of power, including its normative power, market power and power in a realist sense. To this end, he contends that strategic autonomy increases the ambiguity of the EU's global role, rather than triggering a distinct strategic orientation. The starting point of this thesis is to demonstrate that this is an inadequate strategy for understanding the connection between strategic autonomy and the EU's power.

This chapter begins with a section (1.1.) that provides an exploration of Johan Galtung's (1973) conceptualisation of power, in which a distinction is made between projecting power-over-others and possessing power-over-oneself. Dividing power in such a way facilitates the understanding of how the notion of power operates in the Europe-as-a-power debate. This is outlined in the subsequent section (1.2.), with the purpose to highlight how the debate operates with differing assumptions about power. The third section (1.3.) reacts to Helwig's (2022) approach of assessing the EU's power in the context of strategic autonomy through this specific debate, arguing that there are reasons to abstain from such a strategy, namely: (1) it contributes to the 'fuzziness' of the notion; (2) there is reason to believe that the conceptualisations are incommensurable; and (3) because the debate operates with fixed ideas of what the EU *is*, and strategic autonomy is an effort to change what it *is*, the debate is not calibrated to take this evolving role into consideration. Instead, I suggest (in 1.4.), by engaging with Galtung's (1973) conceptualisation of power, that rather than merely performing as a reference point to increase – or enable – various 'channels of power' (see 1.1.), strategic autonomy represents a pursuit of a specific type of power, namely the EU's power-over-itself.

1.1. A Galtungian Approach to Power

Johan Galtung (1973: 33-37) presents a systematic framework to ‘cut and slice’ power. The first two facets to appear are those of *power-over-others* and *power-over-oneself*. The latter can be understood as autonomy, defined as ‘the ability to set goals that are one’s own, not goals one has been brainwashed into by others, *and* to pursue them’ (ibid: 34). This appears to assume that an actor is not dependent on other actors, corresponding to the idea of strategic autonomy as an ability to think for oneself and a capacity to act autonomously. Lacking power-over-oneself does not necessarily mean that an actor is the object of another actor’s power-over-others, but could also be the result of insufficient internal development that involves a failure of maturing into autonomy (Galtung 1973). Power-over-oneself – or autonomy – can be a way to neutralise another actor’s power over you. An example of this in the context of strategic autonomy, would be the way in which the EU’s military power – through NATO – is contingent on the United States; Washington, arguably, has power over the EU in military matters. A fundamental aspect of strategic autonomy is that of developing military capabilities, indicating that the EU wishes to rely less on NATO structures, and, thus, gain power-over-itself in defence matters.

Power-over-others, on the other hand, refers to a more conventional approach to power, in which it is perceived as something you project onto *other* actors. This facet of power is, in Galtung’s (1973) framework, subsequently sliced into the concepts of *channels of power* and *sources of power*. The former refers to how power *operates*, and is further divided into ideological power (power of ideas), remunerative power (power of having goods to offer) and punitive power (power of having ‘bads’, such as force, to use). More specifically, ideological power operates through culture, remunerative power through trade and punitive power through the military. Sources of power, on the other hand, refer to where power *comes from*, derived from something one is, something one has, or a position in a structure. The two first of these – what one is and what one has – are difficult to separate, and are thus subsumed under the category of resource power, while the final one is described as structural power.

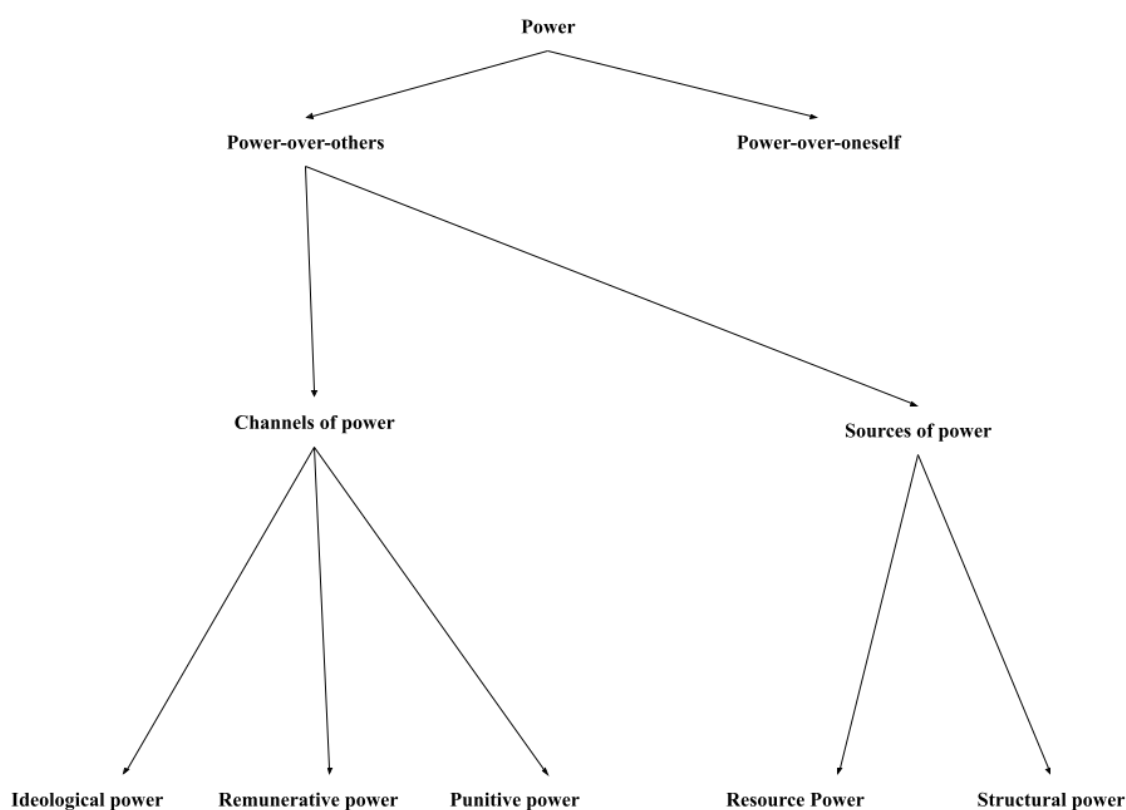


Figure 1: Author's own illustration of Galtung's (1973) conception of power

There are two strategies for an actor to cope with being the subject of other actors' power-over-others. First, the actor can balance the power pressure by achieving a balance of dependence, for instance by forming a trade union. As we have seen, strategic autonomy concerns at its core the EU's dependencies, implying an attempt to balance the power others have over it. The second way of withstanding power directed from the outside, is 'not by directing counter-power in the opposite direction, but by developing more power-over-itself' (ibid: 34). In this way, the actor refuses to be a 'power-receiver' and, thus, makes itself immune to power from others. A truly autonomous actor, he states, is no longer a power-receiver. Galtung (1973) abstains from offering a more extensive explanation on the relationship between power-over-oneself and power-over-others. However, it seems reasonable to assume that possessing the former at least improves the conditions to wield power-over-others.

1.2. The Europe-as-a-power Debate

The so-called Europe-as-a-power debate can be said to have started with François Duchêne's (1972) notion of Civilian Power Europe. Duchêne (1972) claimed that conventional military power had been replaced by progressive civilian power as a method of wielding influence, referring to capabilities such as economic and diplomatic influence. In this, there was a focus on what the European Union *did*; that is, attention was specifically directed on the fact that the European Community was not, for instance, concerned with military matters but, rather, focused on economic integration and pooling of resources.¹

Rather than understanding the EU's power in terms of what it *does*, Manners (2002) introduced the notion of Normative Power Europe (NPE) in response to Duchêne (1972), instead focusing on what it *is*. This, Manners (2002) claims, is the most important factor shaping the international role of the Union. The EU's influence emanates 'simply by virtue of its existence', through the symbolism of its unique character (Wright 2011: 16). Moreover, there is a 'constitutional focus' on values – making up what it *is* – which makes the EU, in the context of foreign policy, inclined to act in a normative way (Keukeleire and Delreux 2022; Manners 2002). This is expressed through the promotion of norms relating to, for instance, peace, democracy and the rule of law (Crawford 2013). Because values are understood as a constitutive element of the EU, it is conceived of as possessing an ability to shape conceptions of the 'normal' in global politics.²

In his seminal work, Manners (2002) utilised the ideas of Carr (1962) and Galtung (1973) to serve as a foundation for the notion of NPE. The former distinguished between three categories of power: military power, economic power and power over opinion (Carr 1962). As we have seen, Galtung (1973) made a similar distinction, namely by dividing power into ideological power, remunerative power and punitive power. Importantly, these are considered *channels of power* which, in turn, are examples of how power-over-others *operates*. Focusing on ideational aspects of power, NPE corresponds, according to Manners (2002), to Carr's concept of 'power over opinion' and Galtung's notion of 'ideological power'. At the same

¹ The European Union (EU) did not, in 1972, exist in its current form. Duchêne's argument concerned, instead, the European Community, which through the Maastricht Treaty in 1993 morphed into the European Union (Tallberg 2021).

² Note that the main argument of this thesis is that the EU aspires to become a 'normal' international actor alongside the likes of the United States and China, potentially undermining the core assumption of NPE, namely that the EU shapes conceptions of the 'normal'.

time, normative power (or ideological power for that matter) is derived from what the EU *is*, implying that the EU's *source of power* is its resource power (which, again, emanates from something one is). NPE appears, then, to concern the EU's power-over-others.

The concept of NPE is a distinct classification of power, resting on the notions of 'power over opinion' and 'ideological power'. To make sense as such, it has to be 'analytically irreducible' to other forms of power (Diez and Manners 2007: 176). With that stated, however, economic power or military power may underpin this normative power, although the more the latter rests on either of the former, the more it resembles traditional forms of power due to a diminished reliance on norms themselves (ibid). It is, here, important to note that although being conceived as a distinct form of power, it can interact with other types of power. One may contend, for instance, that 'normative power without hard power to back it up is a velvet glove without an iron fist inside it' (Toje 2009: 48).

Normative power is often confused with the notion of soft power. As shall be demonstrated (in 3.), the EU frequently employs this concept with regard to its own power. Similar to the notion of NPE, the source of soft power lies in values, and concerns 'the ability to get others to want what you want' (Nye 2021: 197). It stands in contrast to, and is detached from, *hard power*, understood as economic and military power (Lukes 2007; Schmidt 2007). In distinguishing between hard and soft power, Nye (2021: 201) uses a metaphor: 'hard power is like brandishing carrots or sticks; soft power is more like a magnet'. Despite being detached, however, they can, in fact, reinforce one another (Gallarotti 2011). In this view, military force can generate soft power if it is used for purposes consistent with the liberal principles underpinning the notion, for instance peacekeeping. Additionally, the projection of one kind of power might result in the need for the other (ibid). The differences between NPE and soft power are, then, that the former is an exclusively theoretical concept that emphasises what an actor *is*, while the latter was envisioned as an empirical one that stresses what an actor *does* (Diez and Manners 2007; Dimitrova et al 2017).

Damro (2012) contends that there are other significant elements, apart from the institutional focus on values, that shape the EU's identity. 'The EU is, at its core, a market', prompting the conceptualisation of Market Power Europe (MPE) (ibid: 682). The clearest representation of the Union's material existence, according to this perspective, is the European single market. It is imperative, here, to note that an essential component of this argument is that the EU's

identity – what it *is* (a market) – serves as a foundation for its power, again resonating with Galtung’s (1973) notion of resource power. Through the externalisation of economic policies relating to market integration, the EU influences international affairs and thereby exerts its power, referring specifically to when EU institutions make intentional – and persuasive or coercive – efforts to get other actors to adopt market-related regulations comparable to those of the Union (Damro 2012).

Helwig (2022) employs the notion of Realist Power Europe (RPE), originally introduced by Zimmermann (2007). RPE has received significantly less attention than NPE and MPE, and provides less of a coherent approach to the EU’s characteristics as an actor; rather, it simply refers to a realist view of the Union’s global role. In contrast to employing actor-based ontologies, as is the case with NPE and MPE, RPE focuses on structure, emphasising how systemic pressures ‘shape and shove’ the EU’s behaviour on the international stage (Hyde-Price 2006). In terms of power, then, realists focus on military capabilities as they understand conflict and competition as being at the core of international politics (Berenskoetter 2007; Schmidt 2007). Thus, from this perspective, the basis for the EU’s international identity is an emphasis on developing its own defence capabilities (Helwig 2022). Actors also possess ‘second-order concerns’ which relate to the reflection of their political values and other ethical considerations, but when they clash with, for instance, national security concerns, the latter will have priority (Hyde-Price 2006).

Galtung’s (1973) conception of power facilitates the understanding of the dynamics at play in the Europe-as-a-power debate. According to Manners (2002), NPE corresponds to the concept of ideological power in the aforementioned framework. With its focus on economic power, MPE aligns with the notion of remunerative power. These are, then, the *channels of power* that NPE and MPE correspond to respectively. Furthermore, power is derived, in the cases of NPE and MPE, from what the EU *is*, indicating that the *source of power* should be considered its resource power. This stands in contrast to RPE, which emphasises structure, thereby implying that the EU’s *source of power* is its structural power. Tocci (2021: 18) offers a position that appears to correspond to RPE in this way by contending that ‘strategic autonomy is necessary to retain structural power in a multipolar era’, claiming, more specifically, that the EU’s position in the international structure is insufficient to wield power-over-others. Furthermore, because RPE focuses on military capabilities, the *channel of*

power it underscores is punitive power. This demonstrates that the Europe-as-a-power debate operates with different competing ontological commitments when it comes to power.

Manners (2002) is, then, implicitly claiming that the Europe-as-a-power debate concerns the EU's *channels of power*, drawing conclusions about how the EU's power operates from its perceived *source of power*. If we then link this to Helwig's (2022) claim, namely that strategic autonomy is a concept that functions as a reference point for several conceptualisations of the EU's power, including, for instance, NPE, it becomes evident that his strategy involves an assumption that strategic autonomy serves to enable various channels of power. In turn, Helwig's (2022) approach assumes that strategic autonomy concerns the EU's *power-over-others*. The following section elaborates on the issues involved in dealing with the intersection between strategic autonomy and power in such a way.

1.3. Breaking out of the Debate: A Response to Helwig (2022)

Helwig's (2022) approach contributes to the 'fuzziness' of strategic autonomy, prompting the first reason for adopting an alternative strategy. In his effort to link strategic autonomy to the Europe-as-a-power debate, he argues that the former notion serves as a basis for several aspects of the EU's power, namely its normative power, market power and a realist conception of power. These conceptualisations approach strategic autonomy in contrasting ways in terms of its source of identity and what the EU wants to achieve strategic autonomy *from* and *for*. For instance, the NPE perspective views the EU gaining strategic autonomy to protect a 'European way of life', while RPE sees it obtaining strategic autonomy to protect the EU without the need for outside help.³ Along these lines, underpinning the quest for strategic autonomy is, according to NPE, the EU's distinct values, whereas RPE emphasises structural shifts (ibid).

In a subsequent step, Helwig and Sinkkonen (2022) claim that different theoretical approaches within the study of international relations inform our understanding of strategic autonomy. For instance, realism would conceive of strategic autonomy as a driver for hard power capabilities, while constructivism would emphasise value based foreign and trade policy (ibid: 9). In accordance with these views, the main focus of the concept would,

³ Please note that what constitutes a 'European way of life' remains unclear.

according to realism, be to protect security and economic interests whereas constructivism stresses the promotion and protection of norms and values globally (ibid).

| | Constructivism | NPE | Realism | RPE |
|--|---|---|--|---|
| Source of/main focus of strategic autonomy | Promotion/protection of norms and values globally | The EU's distinct values | Protecting security and economic interests | Structural shifts |
| Strategic autonomy as a driver for... | Value based foreign and trade policy | Protecting 'European way of life' and diffuse norms in external relations | Hard power capabilities | Protecting the EU without need for outside help |

Figure 2: Author's own amalgamation of Helwig (2022) and Helwig and Sinkkonen (2022)

A constructivist approach to strategic autonomy is similar to an NPE perspective of the notion, with an emphasis on values and norms, while a realist approach to the concept is – naturally – close to that of RPE, stressing structural shifts and military capabilities. The former approach starts from the assumption that reality is constructed and reproduced through our interactions, whereas the latter assumes that reality exists independently (Helwig and Sinkkonen 2022), highlighting the fact that ontological assumptions determine our understanding of strategic autonomy. It seems, then, that specific theories of international relations, through these suppositions, lead into specific conceptualisations of the EU's power.

To recapitulate, on the one hand, the position adopted in the Europe-as-a-power debate informs the understanding of strategic autonomy (Helwig 2022). On the other hand, international relations theory determines our conception of strategic autonomy (Helwig and Sinkkonen 2022). At the same time, theories of international relations inform our

understanding of the Europe-as-a-power debate. Combining these views, it appears that strategic autonomy can be perceived in a variety of ways, depending on our ontological assumptions. It is, indeed, a fundamental premise of this thesis, in light of the fact that it investigates this fuzzy concept, that its meaning is open for interpretation. While acknowledging diverse perspectives on strategic autonomy is important, this strategy falls short in effectively conveying the essence of the concept, instead contributing to the ‘fuzziness’ of the notion. This, in turn, enables a view of strategic autonomy as increasing the ambiguity of the EU’s global role.

A second reason to opt for a different approach to Helwig (2022) is that there is reason to believe that the concepts employed in the Europe-as-a-power debate are incommensurable. A more detailed examination of the concepts (see 1.2.) demonstrates that they are operating with different assumptions about power. The debate can, at first sight, appear to constitute an even analytical landscape due to NPE, MPE and RPE all corresponding to channels of power. However, NPE and MPE employ actor-based ontologies in contrast to the structure-based ontology of RPE, indicating that the conceptualisations operate with competing understandings of what *causes* power, or where the *source of power* lies. This demonstrates that the Europe-as-a-power debate is not a level playing field, leading one to question whether the conceptualisations are, in fact, comparable. To this end, Berenskoetter (2007: 14) notes that ‘if different dimensions of power operate with different conceptions of causation, then they are incommensurable’, and should not be subsumed under the same research design.

A third reason to abandon Helwig’s (2022) focus on the Europe-as-a-power debate in exploring the strategic autonomy-power nexus, relates to the way in which the debate operates with fixed ideas about what the EU *is*. As I shall argue in the next chapter, strategic autonomy is an effort to change what the EU is. At this juncture, however, it is sufficient to acknowledge that defence projects such as PESCO and CARD, which have been developed within the context of strategic autonomy, should be understood as a gradual effort to change the nature of the EU by establishing structures that lay the groundwork for increasing its defence capabilities. In this way, strategic autonomy entails a pursuit of a new identity (Beaucillon 2023), and, by extension, a transformation of what the EU *is*. Because the Europe-as-a-power debate seeks to characterise the EU’s power based on what it is, and strategic autonomy may entail a change in what it is, the debate is not calibrated to take this

evolving role into consideration, and can therefore not be the ideal approach to the intersection between power and strategic autonomy.

1.4. Strategic Autonomy as the EU's Power-over-itself

Helwig's (2022) approach assumes that strategic autonomy concerns the EU's power-over-others. The main challenge to Helwig (2022) is that this, simply, is untrue. Rather, the *mere concept* of strategic autonomy appears to imply that the EU lacks power-over-itself. It is, at its core, about 'the capacity of the EU to act *autonomously* [emphasis added]' (European Parliament 2022) and 'an ability to *think for oneself* [emphasis added]' (EEAS 2020). These definitions – and the explicit endeavour to achieve strategic autonomy – imply that the EU currently does *not* possess a capacity to act autonomously or to think for itself. Galtung's (1973: 34) concept of power-over-oneself is defined, as articulated previously, as 'the ability to set goals that are one's own, not goals one has been brainwashed into by others, and to pursue them'. The near-synonymous correspondence between the notion of power-over-itself and the most narrowly construed definitions of strategic autonomy supports the claim that this represents the most effective way of understanding the notion with regard to the EU's power.

Galtung (1973) offers two explanations for an actor pursuing such power-over-itself. First, it may do so as a strategy to navigate and respond to the power projected by other actors. Although strategic autonomy has filtered into a multitude of policy areas, it was established within the context of defence policy. Thus, the notion may be understood as a means of dealing with the EU's power-receiving position vis-à-vis Washington in terms of security- and defence policy. As such, strategic autonomy is subject to interpretation as the EU's effort to achieve power-over-itself *in certain policy areas*, such as defence. Second, an actor may pursue power-over-itself as a result of lack of internal development. The EU has, indeed, undergone such development over the years, marked by institutional evolution through treaty changes, resulting in deeper integration. Strategic autonomy may, in this context, be identified as a notion that serves to continue this internal development by, for instance, establishing more advanced defence structures. As such, it plays a role in the EU increasingly resembling a 'normal' international actor.

It appears reasonable to assume that possessing power-over-oneself at least improves the conditions to wield power-over-others. If so, the Europe-as-a-power debate and power-over-others perspective need not be futile in the context of strategic autonomy. Indeed, and as we shall see (in 3.), the EU refers to, for example, its normative power within the strategic autonomy framework. Moreover, the focus on increasing defence capabilities may entail more punitive power. As such, strategic autonomy could unquestionably serve to bolster or enable various forms – or channels – of power. To this end, Helwig’s (2022) approach is not entirely redundant, yet it fails to address the fundamental essence of the concept because it focuses on what strategic autonomy may *result in*, rather than the *process of obtaining it*. However, strategic autonomy could, indeed, be said to represent an effort by the EU to obtain power-over-itself *in order to* project power-over-others more seamlessly.

In sum, in exploring the link between strategic autonomy and power, the argument has been put forth that the former notion serves to increase the EU’s power-over-itself, in contrast to Helwig (2022), who argues (implicitly) that it functions to reinforce its power-over-others. As such, strategic autonomy represents an effort to acquire a specific form of power; one that it lacks in comparison to ‘normal’ international actors. Importantly, in obtaining power-over-itself, the EU is better equipped to project power-over-others. In the following chapter, the concept of ‘actorness’ is introduced as yet another approach in assessing the EU’s power in the context of strategic autonomy.

2. Actorness

In the previous chapter, it was argued that strategic autonomy should be considered an effort by the EU to achieve – or increase – its power-over-itself. An essential aspect in departing from Helwig's (2022) approach through the Europe-as-a-power debate lies in the observation that it operates with fixed ideas about what the EU *is*, while strategic autonomy appears to be an effort to change what it is. In this chapter, the notion of actorness, which refers to an actor's *ability to act* and establishes criteria for its capability to do so, is introduced.

Actorness, in this way, allows us to see how an actor can transform and evolve in its ability to act, shedding light on how strategic autonomy, indeed, constitutes an effort to change the nature of the Union. The benefit of this approach is that actorness allows 'one to hold the EU to some of the same yardsticks as the other principal actors in the international system' (Toje 2008: 204), thereby circumventing the primary concern at hand with the Europe-as-a-power debate. As we shall see, an ability to define one's own goals and having the means to follow through on them are requirements to achieve actorness (Simão 2022). In extension, we can infer that possessing power-over-oneself is a precondition to acquire such actorness. The inclusion of actorness alongside the notion of power-over-oneself is warranted because while the latter allows for an intuitive understanding of the strategic autonomy-power nexus, the former establishes more precise requirements. Importantly, the notion of actorness also addresses the mechanisms that enable an actor's power(-over-others).

This chapter begins with a section (2.1.) that theoretically deconstructs the notion of strategic autonomy. By delving further into the concepts – dependence, strategy and autonomy – that constitute the core of the notion, it becomes apparent that actorness is a notion that addresses these matters. The second section (2.2.) offers an assessment of the EU's actorness through two sets of requirements, while the third section (2.3.) explores external changes that could induce changes in actorness. The main argument of this chapter is that the EU strives to acquire 'true actorness' or to become a 'strategic actor', further supporting the claim that the pursuit of strategic autonomy is, indeed, an effort to become a 'normal' actor in international affairs.

2.1. Theoretically Deconstructing Strategic Autonomy

Actorness is a notion that refers to an actor's *ability to act*. Actors can, naturally, have varying abilities to act autonomously, meaning that actorness is a condition that can evolve (Freire et al 2022). The concept is, furthermore, associated with the ability to project power (Toje 2008), so in achieving a larger degree of actorness, an actor is better positioned to exert its power. In this way, actorness 'speaks to the apparatus and actions that enable [different] forms of power' (Rhinard and Sjöstedt 2019: 17). Importantly, it resonates, as mentioned, with possessing power-over-oneself, permitting insight into how this is connected to power-over-others.

The principles of *presence* and *purpose* are commonly linked to actorness. The former refers to a capacity to behave actively and deliberately in relation to other actors in the international system (Sjöstedt 1977), with autonomy to define one's own laws and decisions understood as a prerequisite to obtain such presence (Simão 2022). In this way, power-over-oneself is a requirement to achieve actorness. The nature of an actor's international presence, however, can not be evaluated without a clear pronouncement of a purpose, in which it details what it *wants* from its international presence (ibid). Strategic autonomy outlines the EU's purpose which, paradoxically, appears to be to achieve *presence*; the Union wants to attain a capacity to behave actively and deliberately in global affairs and, thus, acquire actorness.

As implied by the term's Greek etymology, autonomy refers to the ability of the self (autos) to live by its own laws (nomos) (Tocci 2021). The circumstances in which this is the case may be when there is no external actor that exercises authority within the confines of the state (Krasner 1995) or when a nation-state can articulate and achieve their political goals independently (Russell and Tokatlian 2003).⁴ The latter of these resonates with the most narrowly construed definitions of strategic autonomy, as achieving an ability to 'think for oneself' (EEAS 2020) and possessing 'the capacity [...] to act autonomously' (European Parliament 2022). The EU is currently unable to act autonomously because it is *dependent* on other actors in certain policy areas, say, for instance, on China for rare earth metals or on Taiwan for microchips. In this way, autonomy is closely related to the level of dependence of an actor on other actors, stretching from total dependence to complete self-reliance (Toje

⁴ Krasner (1995) and Russell and Tokatlian (2003) refer to autonomy in the context of the *state* and *nation-state* respectively. Although the EU is, as previously established, not a state, I invite the reader to substitute the terms used with the concept 'political entity' for the sake of the argument.

2008). It is, however, essential to note that there is not a binary choice between dependence and independence; rather, there is a ‘grey area’ in which the EU manages its interdependencies (Helwig and Sinkkonen 2022).

Dependence is, by way of inhibiting an actor to formulate political goals independently, a core component of autonomy. Asymmetrical dependence, then, affects the autonomy of agents (Keohane and Nye 1977). More specifically, dependence is conceived in terms of *sensitivity* and *vulnerability*, the former referring to ‘the degree to which A is affected if B shifts its policy in a specific issue area’, and the latter referring to ‘A’s (in)ability to switch to an alternative source’ (Berenskoetter 2007: 8). In the case of the EU, this vulnerability could be exemplified by the way in which it is heavily – although not entirely – dependent on the U.S. for nuclear deterrence, or the manner in which Russia’s war against Ukraine highlighted the Union’s dependence on Russia in terms of providing energy. In this context, the EU’s self-declared objective to achieve strategic autonomy, as a notion that concerns dependence at its core, should be considered an articulation of – or admitting to – a degree of sensitivity, and an attempt to reduce its vulnerability.

It is specifically *strategic* autonomy that the EU pursues. Strategy refers to an ability to determine long term objectives in such a way as to enable shaping or altering the course of developments in the intended direction (Delphin 2021). More concretely, strategy ‘is, in effect, a course of action, a plan for achieving specified goals’ (Hallenberg 2008: 2). These goals or objectives, in turn, often relate to power relations (Lefebvre 2021). It appears, then, that strategy concerns possessing an *ability to act* on the international stage – or maintaining a large degree of actorness.

To briefly recapitulate, autonomy relates to an actor’s ability to articulate and achieve political goals independently, with dependence as the primary obstacle preventing such capability. Strategy, on the other hand, refers to an ability to plan and pursue specific objectives, often relating to international power dynamics. In connecting the two concepts, Toje (2008: 201) notes that ‘strategy *thrives* on autonomy’ [emphasis added]. What is more, autonomy is a condition that allows for the development of *actorness*, thereby facilitating the projection of power (ibid). In combining the insights from the concepts of autonomy and strategy respectively, we can formulate strategic autonomy as a plan to attain the ability to

articulate and achieve political goals independently, or, indeed, an objective to obtain actorness.

Actorness, then, enters the discussion by way of a direct link to autonomy; an increase in autonomy implies an increase in actorness. At the same time, increased autonomy involves an improved ability to project power. Accordingly, there is a correlation between achieving actorness and an increased capacity to exert power. Strategic autonomy, understood as an objective to acquire an ability to articulate and achieve political goals independently, must, then, imply an ambition to increase its actorness. Formulated with dependence as its starting point: if a change in dependence induces change in autonomy, and a change in autonomy, in turn, induces change in actorness, then strategic autonomy, understood as a pursuit of reducing dependence, indicates an attempt to change its actorness. If the EU establishes its own defence structures, for instance, it will be less dependent on the United States, and, by extension, more autonomous, permitting it to behave actively and deliberately in the international system.

Because actorness is associated with the ability to project power (Toje 2008) and is central to the understanding of the EU's global role (Freire et al 2022), it provides an alternative way of approaching power in the context of strategic autonomy. In contrast to the Europe-as-a-power debate, actorness draws the focus away from the *sui generis* character of the EU (Rhinard and Sjöstedt 2019) and allows for an evaluation of the EU alongside other significant actors in the international system (Toje 2008). In the following section, the EU's actorness is assessed.

2.2. Assessing the European Union's Actorness

In the previous section, actorness was proposed as a concept that neatly corresponds to the essence of strategic autonomy. Much of the scholarly engagement with the EU's actorness consists of an older body of literature that argues that the EU lacks actorness (Hallenberg 2008; Wagnsson 2008). Along these lines, Toje (2008) argued that, because of its high level of dependence on other actors and consequent lack of actorness, the EU should be characterised as a 'small power'.⁵ Indeed, more recent accounts also refrain from identifying

⁵ Note that this argument was put forth in 2008, and that the EU has undergone gradual development since then; the Lisbon treaty, for instance, which developed the Common Security and Defence Policy, came into force in 2009 (Koppa 2022).

the EU as a fully fledged strategic actor (Bento 2022). There is, however, a belief that it is gradually increasing its actorness (Engelbrekt and Hallenberg 2008). For this purpose, let us assess whether strategic autonomy can be understood as a concept designed to acquire actorness.

A range of frameworks exist to evaluate variations of actorness. Christopher Hill (1993, cited in Toje 2008: 203) presents a set of prerequisites for what he characterises as ‘true actorness’:

- (1) a clear identity;
- (2) a self-contained decision making system; and
- (3) practical capabilities to affect policy

Strategic autonomy can be understood as a pursuit of Hill’s (1993) ‘true actorness’. In the context of the EU, regarding practical matters, the establishment of the Common Defence and Security Policy (CDSP) could be seen as the creation of such a *self-contained decision making system* in matters relating to security and defence, while the establishment of PESCO and CARD mark an intention to lay the groundwork for obtaining the *practical capabilities to affect its policy* of, for instance, promoting peace and the rule of law abroad. Regarding the aspect of capabilities, Sjursen (1998: 95) remarks that ‘actorness cannot and should not be viewed separately from actual capabilities’. Thus, the focus on security and defence in the context of strategic autonomy indicates that – if we believe that it is ‘true actorness’ that the EU is pursuing – the Union perceives military means, or hard power, as an integral aspect of such actorness. To this end, the second and third conditions of Hill’s concept of ‘true actorness’ would be fulfilled. Moving forward, Beaucillon (2023: 428) perceives strategic autonomy as ‘part of the renewed international identity of the EU’, further resonating with Toje’s (2008) claim that autonomy allows for a development of strategic *identity*. Such an understanding of the notion satisfies the third aspect of Hill’s ‘true actorness’. Importantly, the EU does currently not fulfil these requirements, but the stated objectives of strategic autonomy align with them.

Jan Hallenberg (2008: 3) offers an additional conception of what constitutes a ‘strategic actor’, setting up five defining features:

- (1) capacity for autonomous observation and analysis of its external environment;

- (2) capacity to articulate desired objectives and to structure these goals hierarchically;
- (3) ability to select among the means it has at its disposal;
- (4) ability to implement its strategy in concrete action; and
- (5) ability to evaluate previous events and assimilate insights from them

| | | |
|--------------------------|--|------------------|
| Hill (1993) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Clear identity ● Self-contained decision-making system ● Practical capabilities to affect policy | ‘True Actorness’ |
| Hallenberg (2008) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Capacity for autonomous observation and analysis of its external environment ● Capacity to articulate desired objectives and to structure these goals hierarchically ● Ability to select among the means it has at its disposal ● Ability to implement its strategy in concrete action ● Ability to evaluate previous events and assimilate insights from them | Strategic Actor |

Figure 3: Author’s own illustration of Hill’s (1993) and Hallenberg’s (2008) requirements for achieving ‘true actorness’ and becoming a ‘strategic actor’ respectively

The Strategic Compass (2022), a document that aims to guide the CDSP, explicitly refers to the notion of strategic autonomy (and is further analysed in 3.2.), provides ‘a shared assessment of [the EU’s] strategic environment’ (ibid: 11), ‘specif[ies] clear targets and milestones’ (ibid), ‘translate[s] common ambition into actionable proposals’ (ibid: 6) and demonstrates ‘a clear commitment to learn the right lessons from [the Ukraine] crisis’ (ibid: 5), fulfilling, respectively, the first, second, fourth and fifth of Hallenberg’s (2008) requirements for obtaining the status of a strategic actor.⁶ It is, importantly, stated as an intention to ‘set [...] out new ways and means to improve [the] collective ability to defend the

⁶ In the analysis of Borrell’s (HR/VP) speech (in 3.3.), it is contended that the fact that the EU is a conglomerate of actors (Bento 2022) acts as an impediment to fulfil Hallenberg’s (2008) first condition.

security of [the] Union’ (Strategic Compass 2022: 11), demonstrating an objective to fulfil Hallenberg’s third requirement. The significance of this final observation is noteworthy, as it reveals where the EU currently falls short of acquiring actorness, namely in terms of defence capabilities, which is, as mentioned, an integral aspect of achieving strategic autonomy.

There are, then, different ways of defining actorness – or a strategic actor. Both sets of requirements have in common that actorness must involve an ability to set policy objectives and have the practical capabilities to implement them. As we have seen, this – achieving an ability to act autonomously – is precisely what strategic autonomy is about. It is, additionally, noteworthy that actorness resonates with the notion of power-over-oneself. To reiterate, power-over-oneself refers to an ‘ability to set goals that are one’s own [...] and to pursue them’ (Galtung 1973: 34); actorness involves, for instance, a ‘capacity to articulate desired objectives’ and an ‘ability to implement its strategy in concrete action’ (Hallenberg 2008: 3). One could argue that the fact that an advancement in actorness entails an increased ability to *project* power, implies that the notion is, in fact, more relevant in the context of the EU’s power-over-others. The argument against this is that the Union currently lacks actorness *because* of the absence of practical capabilities to affect its policy, meaning that it first needs to acquire power-over-itself. That is, in *pursuing* actorness, the EU attempts to acquire power-over-itself; in *obtaining* it, however, it will be able to wield power-over-others. In the next section, the question of whether external factors could induce a change in actorness is explored.

2.3. External Changes in Actorness

The previous section discussed internal factors that contribute to actorness and, in turn, autonomy. The level of autonomy an entity enjoys, however, can also depend on variations in external factors (Rhinard and Sjöstedt 2019). In extension, actorness changes – and evolves – as a result of changes in geopolitical contexts (Toje 2008; Rhinard and Sjöstedt 2019; Freire et al 2022). Examples of such changes include the onset of a new existential threat and changes in security guarantees, or, more broadly speaking, fundamental changes to international order (Toje 2008; Freire et al 2022). For instance, the end of bipolar confrontation during the Cold War allowed the EU to operate alongside the United States, the leader of a democratic and rules-based international order (Freire et al 2022). Scholars are,

however, increasingly arguing that the unipolarity that appeared after the Cold War is being contested to a greater extent (Ikenberry 2020). Strategic autonomy is, accordingly, necessary to retain structural power in a multipolar era (Tocci 2021). A view that geopolitical contexts give rise to changes in actorness aligns with the aforementioned four waves of the strategic autonomy debate (Helwig and Sinkkonen 2022); the notion has gained prominence in regard to events such as Trump's presidency and Russia's aggression towards Ukraine. Regarding the former, Hyde-Price (2006: 231) predicted that 'deteriorating transatlantic relations might act as a catalyst for a more cohesive EU with a sharper and more effective international role', which is, arguably, precisely what strategic autonomy is fundamentally concerned with.

The idea that actorness and autonomy change as a result of changes in external factors is supported by the theory of structural autonomy, a variant of structural realism (Harknett and Yalcin 2012). Instead of understanding international politics as a struggle for power, as realists do (see 1.2.), the theory suggests that it is better understood as a struggle for autonomy. More specifically, actors react to the conditions that could entail a change in their level of autonomy. The reaction consists of rearranging goals and behaviours in accordance with their capabilities. In this context, their position in the international distribution of power plays an important role in determining the strategies of autonomy they will adopt (ibid). With the third largest economy in the world and a population of approximately 500 million, the adoption of such an ambitious policy as the pursuit of strategic autonomy is unsurprising in an increasingly multipolar world which is, arguably, a condition in which actors' autonomy increases or decreases. In relation to other significant actors of large populations or economies, the EU lacks, as stated, its own defence structures; this is at the core of the strategy that the EU has adopted in this struggle for autonomy.

It is, then, undeniably the case that external factors can bring about change in actorness. The war in Ukraine, the Brexit referendum and Trump's presidency have all been contributing factors in igniting the EU's pursuit of strategic autonomy. Emerging multipolarity is a condition in which there is a greater risk of being the subject of other actor's power-over-others, which is a reason to pursue power-over-oneself. Importantly, however, the change in actorness *itself* – or obtaining power-over-oneself for that matter – involves internal dynamics, including acquiring certain abilities and capabilities relating to the articulation of objectives and having the means to act on them, even though they may be the result of changes in external dynamics.

2.4. Strategic Autonomy as a Pursuit of Actorness

This chapter introduced the notion of actorness to the understanding of the strategic autonomy-power nexus. Actorness concerns an actor's *ability to act*, setting up requirements pertaining to the ability to formulate objectives and having the capabilities to effectively carry them out. Currently, the Union falls short of actorness, notably with respect to its practical capabilities of affecting policy. However, the objectives of strategic autonomy align with the requirements of actorness.

Rather than representing a mere 'headline under which debates over the future course of the EU in international affairs unfold' (Helwig and Sinkkonen 2022: 6), strategic autonomy should be considered an attempt by the EU to achieve actorness. The EU's articulated purpose is to achieve international presence; it wants to obtain a capacity to behave actively and deliberately on the international stage. As such, it is a pursuit of a new strategic identity, thereby changing what it *is*. In this quest, the EU is, in some way, gaining power-over-itself, and will be better positioned to exert power-over-others. Importantly, in turning to actorness, it becomes clear what differs between the EU and the other main actors on the international stage, namely practical capabilities. The focus on such matters in the context of strategic autonomy demonstrates that the EU wants to become a 'normal' international actor. The ensuing chapter puts this notion – as well as power-over-oneself – into dialogue with the EU's discourse on power in the context of strategic autonomy.

3. Safeguarding Soft Power and Developing Hard Power

In the preceding chapters, it has been posited that strategic autonomy should be considered an effort by the EU to acquire power-over-itself and actorness. In this chapter, the EU's references to power within the context of strategic autonomy are investigated, illustrating, in practical contexts, the application of the aforementioned theoretical concepts. Although the essence of strategic autonomy is best captured by the notions of power-over-oneself and actorness, the endeavour also intends to enable channels of power, increasing the possibility of wielding power-over-others. To this end, this chapter is not only concerned with the process of obtaining strategic autonomy, but also what kind of power it will eventually result in. The EU's use of 'power' in the context of strategic autonomy is, therefore, put into dialogue with the notions of power-over-oneself and actorness, but also engages with the conceptualisations explored in the Europe-as-a-power debate. Naturally, the EU refrains from employing the highly theoretical notions of, for instance, NPE and power-over-itself. Rather, less intricate terms such as 'soft power' (which was conceptualised in 1.2.) and 'hard power', which relates to military, or punitive, power, are frequently used.

Rather than elucidating whether strategic autonomy is predominantly used as a reference point for one of the conceptualisations of the EU's power (for instance, its normative power) over the others, Helwig (2022) contends that it integrates with NPE, MPE as well as RPE. This chapter demonstrates that strategic autonomy, indeed, focuses on which channels of power it seeks to safeguard and increase, namely its soft power and hard power respectively. Considering the concepts explored in this thesis, the objective to augment hard power should be perceived as admitting to a lack of power-over-oneself and actorness; it is *because* of insufficient hard power that the EU can not act autonomously, actively and deliberately. This supports the argument that the EU is attempting to achieve power-over-itself and actorness in order to enable a specific channel of power, namely its punitive power. In turn, this indicates that the notion of hard power is underpinning the concept of strategic autonomy.

This chapter analyses two documents produced by the Union as well as two speeches by politicians in leadership positions within the EU. It examines a *Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy* (2016), also known as the European Union

Global Strategy (EUGS), and the *Strategic Compass* (2022). These documents were selected due to their strategic character; they aim to guide the CDSP and explicitly refer to the notion of strategic autonomy. The EUGS ‘nurture[d] the ambition of strategic autonomy’ (EUGS 2016: 4) according to Federica Mogherini, the HR/VP⁷ at the time, while the Strategic Compass (2022: 23) was produced ‘to enhance the EU’s strategic autonomy’. The speeches *Why European strategic autonomy matters* by the current HR/VP Josep Borrell (2020) and *Strategic Autonomy for Europe - the aim of our generation* by Charles Michel (2020), President of the European Council, provide direct insight, by way of firsthand accounts, into the intentions and reasoning behind the notion of strategic autonomy from influential politicians in the Union.

This selection of primary source material carries an inherent risk. In spite of the fact that strategic autonomy started out as a concept that was primarily related to security- and defence policy, it has, indeed, been applied to other policy areas. The EUGS as well as the Strategic Compass are documents produced within this policy realm, potentially creating a bias towards conceptions of power that veer towards RPE and punitive power, with their emphasis on military aspects of power. As we shall see, however, the speeches by Borrell and Michel, which tackle the notion in a broad and overarching manner, demonstrate that although strategic autonomy considers a range of policy areas, it does indeed *focus* on matters relating to security and defence, such as material capabilities.

3.1. European Union Global Strategy

The EUGS (2016) demonstrates that we should understand strategic autonomy, with respect to the EU’s power, as an endeavour to safeguard its *existing power*, characterised as soft power, while the requisite power to protect it, is deemed to be hard power. Joseph Nye, who coined the term soft power, asked the former U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld about the notion of soft power, receiving the reply ‘I don’t know what “soft power” is’ (Schmidt 2007: 62). The same cannot be said about the EU; soft power is frequently incorporated into the strategic discourse:

⁷ HR/VP is the abbreviation for ‘High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission’. Essentially, this is the equivalent of the EU’s Foreign Minister.

‘The European Union has always prided itself on its soft power – and it will keep doing so, because we are the best in this field. However, the idea that Europe is an exclusively “civilian power” does not do justice to an evolving reality [...] For Europe, soft and hard power go hand in hand’ (EUGS 2016: 4).

‘Evolving reality’ and ‘fragile world’ are conceptions of the external environment that are used to underscore the need for hard power: ‘In this fragile world, soft power is not enough: we must enhance our credibility in security and defence’ (EUGS 2016: 44). This indicates that hard power – or punitive power – is perceived as an essential aspect of strategic autonomy, while the reference to a fragile world indicates an evolution of actorness as a result of geopolitical developments. What is more, it demonstrates that the EU currently possesses soft power, but now needs to back it up with hard power, resonating with the proposition that the possession of the former can create a demand for the latter (Gallarotti 2011), also in accordance with the view that strategic autonomy ‘helps to bring hard and soft power together in a coherent continuum’ (Beaucillon 2023: 427). The explicit reasoning is that ‘an appropriate level of ambition and strategic autonomy is important for Europe’s ability to foster peace and safeguard security within and beyond its borders’ (EUGS 2016: 19). Again, strategic autonomy, which, as we have inferred, includes an effort to increase hard power, is needed for the continued projection of soft power.

In sum, the EUGS (2016) demonstrates that strategic autonomy should be considered an endeavour to safeguard the EU’s *existing power*, characterised as soft power. In order to protect its current soft power, however, it needs to increase its hard power. This need, in turn, is perceived as being a result of external developments. As maintained previously (in 2.3.), structural shifts may induce a change in actorness; an attempt to safeguard its power by developing hard power capabilities would cause such a change. The current lack of material capabilities – and an increasing emphasis on developing them – is the result of insufficient internal development, also perceived as the absence of possessing power-over-itself.

3.2. Strategic Compass

The Strategic Compass (2022), which as mentioned aims to enhance the EU’s strategic autonomy, indicates a clear commitment to becoming a credible strategic actor which, as we

have seen, requires power-over-oneself. Previously (in 2.2.), it was contended that the Strategic Compass contains references that indicate a pursuit of becoming a strategic actor in Hallenberg's (2008) terms, supporting the claim that strategic autonomy is an effort to achieve – or increase – the EU's actorness. The document is stated to 'contribute to the EU's credibility as a strategic actor' (ibid: 33), and nurtures 'the EU's ambition to be [a] global strategic player' (ibid: 53). The document is littered with references to similar expressions such as 'strengthening [the EU's] geopolitical posture' (ibid: 62) and that the EU needs to be 'a stronger political and security actor' (ibid: 15). In this way, the Union is defining its *purpose*, namely to achieve international *presence*, characterised as the capacity to act deliberately in relation to other actors, further demonstrating its commitment to achieving actorness.

The EU wants to become a global strategic player, implying a desire to increase its power. In contrast to the EUGS, the Strategic Compass offers few explicit reflections on *what kind of power* the Union itself wields – or wants to wield. It can be discerned, however, how Brussels conceives power in more general terms. With regard to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it is stated that the 'crisis has made it even clearer that we live in a world shaped by raw power politics' (ibid: 4). Moreover, references to a 'contested multipolar world' (ibid: 18), further indicate a realist assessment of world politics, in which systemic pressures shape the behaviour of actors on the international stage. Josep Borrell (HR/VP) notes, to this end, in his foreword, that:

'Europeans will continue to favour dialogue over confrontation; diplomacy over force; multilateralism over unilateralism. But it is clear that if you want dialogue, diplomacy and multilateralism to succeed, you need to put power behind it. That is the point of 'learning to speak the language of power' (ibid: 6).

At least, the quote implies that the EU does not currently speak the 'language of power'. More specifically, it implies that dialogue and diplomacy are not constitutive elements of this 'language of power'. Instead, the conceptualisation of power takes on a different form, suggesting that Borrell alludes to hard power. Upon closer scrutiny, then, this quote aligns with the statement in the EUGS (see 3.1.) in which hard power was stated to be necessary to underpin the Union's soft power.

There is a notable absence of explicit references to notions pertaining to ideational power, such as soft power and normative power. To be sure, the document title does, indeed, refer to such power implicitly: ‘A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence: For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security’. The name demonstrates a purpose, namely, that the strategic compass – and by extension strategic autonomy – is necessary to protect values and interests, and to promote peace and security. Again, this suggests that safeguarding its normative – or soft – power is the underlying reason for pursuing strategic autonomy.

In conclusion, the Strategic Compass (2022) demonstrates a clear intention by the Union to become a global strategic actor. I have suggested that the goals outlined in the document fulfil Hallenberg’s (2008) requirements for being considered as such. In obtaining the status as a global strategic actor, the EU will have gained power-over-itself, strengthening its geopolitical posture and facilitating the projection of power-over-others. As a result of an increasingly realist assessment of world politics, hard power is, once again, perceived as necessary to safeguard its soft power.

3.3. Speech by Josep Borrell (HR/VP)

Josep Borrell (2020) declares in the introduction of his speech *Why European strategic autonomy matters* that ‘it is difficult to claim to [...] act as a “global player” [...] without being “autonomous”’. Along these lines, it is stated that ‘strategic autonomy is [...] intended to ensure that Europeans increasingly take charge of themselves’. This is, indeed, a clear admission that the EU lacks – and seeks to acquire – power-over-itself. Strategic autonomy is, therefore, a matter of ‘political survival’ and ‘remain[ing] somewhat credible in the world’.

Borrell’s speech does not concede much in regard to *what kind of power* the Union projects – or attempts to project. It is, however, stated that ‘what was traditionally called soft power is becoming an instrument of hard power’. Although this aspect is not elaborated on, it indicates, again, that strategic autonomy merges soft and hard power. However, it is clear that to maintain strategic relevance, there is a ‘need to close many capability gaps and loopholes and to be present and active in areas where our interests are at stake’. This reaffirms the EU’s

acknowledgment of its lack of actorness; having practical capabilities to affect policy is a requirement of Hill's (1993) to achieve 'true actorness', while possessing the ability to implement strategy into concrete action serves as a condition to be considered a 'strategic actor' in Hallenberg's (2008) terms. As stated, however, this acknowledgement indicates a *pursuit* of actorness. Moreover, it reveals what kind of power the Union is lacking, namely hard power.

Although Borrell implies that the EU is a power to be reckoned with on the international stage, he admits that 'not all European states see the problems through the same lenses [...] and as result they do not have the same strategic perceptions'. This issue is the result of a perception of the Union as a conglomerate of strategic actors rather than one coherent strategic actor (Bento 2022). Moreover, this problem implies a potential shortfall in satisfying the first of Hallenberg's (2008) conditions to be considered a 'strategic actor', namely a capacity for autonomous observation of its external environment, as well as Hill's (1993) requirement of a clear identity. As such, the mere notion of strategic autonomy demonstrates an attempt to make the EU's member states see the problems through the same lenses, thereby acquiring actorness as a Union.

To conclude, Borrell's speech demonstrates that strategic autonomy is pursued to achieve the status as a global strategic player, or, in the context of this thesis, to increase its actorness. It involves a recognition of the EU's current lack of power-over-itself. The myriad of strategic perceptions in the Union is, however, presented as a challenge to becoming a coherent strategic actor. Furthermore, the speech indicates that soft and hard power are intertwined in the strategic autonomy narrative.

3.4. Speech by Charles Michel (President of European Council)

According to Charles Michel (2020), the Union's autonomy has continuously evolved since its conception. The creation of the single market, the Schengen area, the Euro and the 2004 enlargement, coupled with the Treaty of Lisbon, are factors that have contributed to the increased autonomy of the EU. Although Michel refrains from elaborating on *how* these aspects have led to an increase in autonomy, it may be surmised that the Treaty of Lisbon, which, as mentioned, developed the CSDP and thereby created a self-contained decision

making system, led to developments in actorness; autonomy and actorness (as seen in 2.1.) function in tandem. This increase in autonomy has, according to Michel, led to the EU's 'ability to spread rules and standards across the globe', in close reference to the concept of NPE.

Michel (2020) appears, then, to claim that the EU projects normative – or soft – power, further remarking that the 'strength of our economic and social model lies in the fact that it is founded [...] on the bedrock of our values. It gives us great legitimacy and makes us hugely attractive in the eyes of many partners around the world'. That Michel perceives the EU's power as ideational in nature is further supported by the statement that an objective of strategic autonomy is to 'safeguard our capacity to set standards. That capacity is a key factor contributing to Europe's *current power* [emphasis added]', characterised as its normative power, its ability to set standards for the normal. What this 'normal' consists of, however, is disappointing in the context of the discussion on the EU's global power. Ironically, Michel exemplifies this ability to set standards by referring to 'standards on the use of chemical substances [that] ensure that toys produced around the world are safe. [The] General Data Protection Regulation set[s] the global standard for the protection of privacy online'. Statements such as these generate giggles in the offices of *The Economist* (2023), where the EU's power is characterised as confined to standardising phone chargers.⁸

Michel discusses the circumstances that have led to the current pursuit of strategic autonomy, addressing this by noting that 'the globalised world has changed radically since the end of the Cold War. And because an arc of instability has emerged around us'. The analysis continues to allude to developments such as Russia's aggression in Ukraine, Brexit, protectionism and weakening multilateralism. Again, strategic autonomy is a concept that has grown out of a realist assessment of shifts in world politics; structural shifts have induced changes in the EU's actorness. Michel concludes his speech by offering a set of summarising observations:

'Our objectives are ambitious and demanding: peace and prosperity, [...] a power working for a world that is more respectful, more ethical, and more just. Sovereignty, independence, empowerment [...], less dependence, more influence. Effective strategic autonomy is the

⁸ Please note that such a view operates with a certain conception of power, namely that power is only relevant in the domain of 'high politics', thereby neglecting the impact of normative power.

credo that brings us together to define our destiny, and to have a positive impact on the world’.

This quote, once again, shows that strategic autonomy is an effort to increase the EU’s power in the world. Interestingly, more influence appears in direct correlation to less dependence; this corresponds to the claim (see 2.1.) that strategy – and power – thrive(s) on autonomy. The Union pursues such power in order to shape the world according to its own objectives, emphasising notions such as peace and justice, principles that correspond to the concept of NPE. What is more, in defining its destiny, the EU is articulating a purpose with its international presence, further resonating with the notion of actorness.

In conclusion, Michel’s (2020) speech clearly indicates that strategic autonomy is intimately connected to increasing the Union’s power. In reducing its dependence on other actors – and thereby gaining more power-over-itself – it is better positioned to exert power-over-others. Strategic autonomy, then, is needed to safeguard the EU’s current power, which, again, is perceived as ideational in nature, and has grown out of a realist assessment of world politics.

3.5. Strategic Autonomy to Safeguard Soft Power and Increase Hard Power

This chapter has empirically analysed the EU’s references to power in the context of strategic autonomy. Following a similar analysis of speeches and documents, Helwig (2022: 37), concludes that the notion exacerbates ‘the continuous role ambiguity that the EU is facing in a more complex international environment’, serving as a reference point for its objectives relating to its normative power, market power and military power. Insofar as Helwig (2022) argues, strategic autonomy does, indeed, encompass several dimensions of power, yet he does not demonstrate that there is an emphasis on protecting one dimension and enabling another. This chapter, conversely, has demonstrated that rather than merely representing an ambiguous concept, strategic autonomy offers insights into the Union’s reflections on both its *current power* and the *kind of power* it wants to wield.

With regard to power, strategic autonomy reflects two clear objectives. Firstly, it is necessary to safeguard the EU’s *existing power*. This aspect is emphasised in the EUGS, the Strategic

Compass as well as in Charles Michel's speech. This existing power is, in turn, characterised as ideational. More specifically, explicit references are made to soft power, power of attraction, an ability to spread rules and standards as well as intentions to promote dialogue and diplomacy. Secondly, strategic autonomy is necessary to become a *global strategic player* and increase its hard power, in turn, intending to become a 'normal' international actor. As such, the Union is in a better position to protect this existing power, but will also be able to exert other forms of power. To this end, the Union needs to increase its capabilities, demonstrating an intention to develop its actorness and gaining power-over-itself. The intention to increase its hard power is the result of a realist assessment of global politics, in which it views the world as fragile and shaped by raw power politics.

The references to soft and hard power in this context implies that strategic autonomy is also concerned with its power-over-others because, as we have seen (in 1.1.), these correspond to channels of power, through ideological power and punitive power respectively. Consequently, this suggests that there is an objective – or expectation – that strategic autonomy will enable specific channels of power, namely hard – or punitive – power, increasing its power-over-others. Importantly, however, this does not change the fact that the essence of the concept concerns the EU's power-over-itself. Rather, admitting to a lack of punitive power, in turn, implies a corresponding shortfall of actorness. The EU, due to its limited punitive power, does not have the practical capabilities to affect policy, revealing a lack of actorness – or power-over-itself. As Borrell (2020) noted, it is difficult to claim to be a global power without being autonomous; asserting a projection of power-over-others is difficult if there is no – or insufficient – power-over-itself.

In other words, the EU perceives itself as possessing the ability to project soft power despite its shortfall in actorness and power-over-itself. This, in turn, raises the question of whether some channels of power, such as ideological power, require less power-over-oneself – or autonomy – than others.⁹ Consequently, it appears to be the case that other channels of power, such as punitive power, underpin the notion of (strategic) autonomy, and hence, actorness and power-over-oneself.

⁹ This should be considered as a topic for future research.

Conclusion

The European Union is neither a state nor merely a regional organisation; it is a political entity of its own kind. Due to its elusive nature, characterising the EU's power has proved to be a challenging task. The notion of strategic autonomy, which concerns the EU's ability to act autonomously, has grown in significance in Brussels, notably in light of Russia's war against Ukraine. Given its relevance to the EU's global role, strategic autonomy has the potential to provide insights into *what kind* of power it wants to possess, further complicating the prospect of characterising its power; yet, this connection has not been sufficiently made. To this end, this thesis has explored how the notion of strategic autonomy should be understood with regard to the EU's power.

Rather than contributing to an ambiguous global role, strategic autonomy represents an effort by the EU to escape its enigmatic character and to mature into a 'normal' international actor. As such, it provides a distinct direction in terms of its global role. Furthermore, rather than serving as a basis for a multitude of aspects of power, the quest for strategic autonomy includes a pursuit of a specific form of power, namely power-over-itself. It also signifies an attempt to acquire 'true actorness' or becoming a 'strategic actor'. In obtaining power-over-itself and actorness, the EU will have evolved into a 'normal' international actor.

The intersection between strategic autonomy and power has previously been tackled by Helwig (2022), who understands the notion as concerning the EU's power-over-others. A more detailed examination of strategic autonomy, however, demonstrates that the essence of the concept aligns closer to the EU's power-over-itself. Importantly, though, through the acquisition of power-over-itself, for instance in terms of autonomous defence structures, the EU is better positioned to exert power-over-others. Indeed, the Union perceives itself as already possessing the ability to project soft power(-over-others). At this juncture, there is a desire to move beyond the characterisation as a 'military worm' by pursuing hard power capabilities in order to safeguard this existing power, laying the groundwork for enabling novel channels of power in the form of punitive power, further admitting to its lack of actorness. This, as mentioned, indicates that the notion of hard power is underpinning the concepts of actorness, power-over-oneself and, indeed, strategic autonomy. To this end, the EU's power-over-others is not irrelevant; however, it should be viewed as an *outcome* of achieving strategic autonomy rather than constituting the core of the notion.

In employing the notion of actorness, it becomes evident what sets the EU apart from other international actors, namely the practical capability to affect policy. In this context, strategic autonomy represents the pursuit of a new strategic identity in which it has the capacity to act autonomously, for instance in matters of defence, thereby constituting a change in what it *is*. Strategic autonomy, further, involves an exposition of its purpose, namely to have international presence. Transforming its nature, in this way, serves as a demonstration of the internal development it strives for: the effort to achieve actorness and power-over-itself.

The dual forces of a 'fragile world' as a result of emerging multipolarity and a lack of internal development has prompted the EU to recognise that it cannot be confined to its role as an 'unidentified political object'. In light of this, it aspires to achieve strategic autonomy through a pursuit of power-over-itself and actorness, characterised by an effort to develop hard power capabilities. In this way, strategic autonomy constitutes the beginning of the EU's journey towards becoming a 'normal' international actor.

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