

Book Review

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https://doi.org/10.57767/jobs_2023_009

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How a Book about the Future Turned to Recent History Even before Being Published. Book review of *European Strategic Autonomy and Small States' Security*. Edited by Giedrius Česnakas and Justinas Juozaitis

What is the aim, essence and added value of European Strategic Autonomy (ESA) in light of NATO's existing aims and capabilities? This has been a challenging and complicated question for both political and military leaders (but also for authors of the current study) to answer throughout the small states in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). What does European Strategic Autonomy include, would its development upset the United States and the United Kingdom, do we need to spend double the amount to create a second set of autonomous capabilities, are we about to have a competing design of weapon systems to the US; those are only a few of the important questions posed by experts and politicians in 2021 when this collected volume started to evolve. It can be summarized into one short question for national policy makers: "Is it worth all of the costs to have autonomy to challenge NATO's decision to act or not?". Political and military leaders, when interviewed by authors, tend to highlight that NATO, differently from the ESA, quickly delivers necessary capabilities to its member states and straightforward messages to adversaries. As long as this continues, the EU with its ideas of strategic autonomy and the European Army is viewed as "Plan B", for in case the necessity arises.

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The 16 authors of the study in question, many of them among high level political and military experts of European small states, fear that the ESA, with France at its centre consists of mostly Franco-German interests. They also point to the general ambiguity that surrounds the concept. It is certainly true that the ESA has remained to a large extent at a rhetorical level, the concept being ill-defined. What should the European Union do to make strategic autonomy work? How can we understand whether we really need this strategic autonomy? For one, the EU was expected to make it clear that small member states do not need to choose between NATO's credible deterrence and EU strategic autonomy. In its current format the ESA is mostly about rhetoric whilst support from the military and political elite was hardly seen to have been earned.

This volume presents small states' perceptions of European strategic autonomy, highlighting their expectations and concerns. The chapters focus on the depth and breadth of European strategic autonomy, national security considerations, an assessment of its impact on transatlantic relations, its expected outputs, and the potential impact on the EU's institutional structure. It also shows how systemic circumstances and the interests of powerful states, either those within the EU (France, Germany, and Poland) or those that have a significant say in European security architecture (the US), establish opportunities and constraints for the small states to shape European strategic autonomy. In particular, the study focuses on the diverging interests of the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, and the Netherlands. It demonstrates that, in most cases, European strategic autonomy is not perceived as an alternative to NATO but as a supplementary element that could facilitate the development of national military capabilities, indigenous defence industries and resilience to non-military threats.

This collected volume was planned to be a comprehensive and structured overview and analysis of how the EU's small states understand the essence and necessity of European Strategic autonomy. These topics are covered by 16 different authors from 14 different states over 15 chapters in 242 pages following a similar format, analysing similar political and military representatives. Of course, for small states in the CEE, especially the ones neighboring Russia and Belarus. Central research aim was how the European Strategic Autonomy could or would contribute to their own security and what would be expected in exchange from them. Over the last decade

there have been many challenges in gaining an answer to that simple question. The scope of the debate has been in development: between 2005 and 2017 European Strategic Autonomy debate focused to the necessity over PESCO and the European Army inside the broader concept of ESA. Since 2018, this debate has been refocused to the question of whether the ESA provides a competitive or co-operational challenge to the US and NATO.

These questions have formed the structure and focus for the work in question, “European Strategic Autonomy and Small States’ Security”. The book has succeeded to thoroughly and excellently analyze and summarize these focal questions. This volume also offers numerous proposals on how to find a more practical and transparent role for the concept of European Strategic Autonomy. However, while the experts of CEE small states (some of them also the authors of the reviewed collected volume) were busy clarifying what they needed to contribute and what would be the best budgetary option to improve their security, in February 2022 Russia decided to launch a full scale attack both against Ukraine and international rules-based order which of course changed the whole context regarding the dilemmas and debates surrounding European Strategic Autonomy.

Indeed, events can sometimes reveal reality from an unexpected angle, and this is what has happened with the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. The context and debates which informed the volume have changed dramatically. Perhaps one of the more surprising aspects was that the outbreak of war has enabled Europeans to see with fresh clarity the reality surrounding European Strategic Autonomy. Hitherto, the debates focused – and this is also the case with the collected volume – on the question of what to do with existing capabilities and capacities. Nobody really assessed if those capabilities were actually available and ready for deployment. Even if there were aspects wherein significant improvements could be made, a basic readiness to harness these capabilities was believed to be there. However, this presupposition has been proved completely wrong. The war has revealed the fact that the capabilities and especially the capacities are minuscule and, in any case, completely out of sync with the actual needs for the war fought in Ukraine, or any other war of a similar magnitude. Thus, the war has enabled a much more realistic

question to be posed: what we as Europeans should do with the missing capabilities and capacities.

Moreover, when in the pre-war context it seemed that the main challenge was to find a specific niche and add value to European assets without creating tensions with and within NATO, then the first months of the war has revealed completely new needs (also new deficits) and priorities. In light of Russian aggression, NATO openly limited its role to ensure only the security of member states, but not to have any role in the assistance of Ukraine, this being left to other security actors. Additionally, it appeared that the production capabilities of the Western military industry, that were believed to be far superior compared to that of Russia, lagged far behind or were totally absent. Even providing service and reparation of the existing equipment proved to be a huge challenge. This all indicates a great need for well financed multilateral actors, ones able to unite and institutionalize the capabilities of EU member states first to assist Ukraine but also to be ready to secure other member states against military threats in the near future, and to do it without the US if necessary. The geopolitical situation in Europe as impacted by Russian aggression against Ukraine offers a unique opportunity for the European Union (EU) to enable deeper integration in terms of security and defence. Particularly from a security perspective, current geopolitical needs certainly highlight not only the challenges, but also the possible chances for the EU to become a more global player.

Unfortunately, and probably inevitably, the changes and needs for European Strategic Autonomy that have appeared since February 2022 are not in any way foreseen, described or analyzed in this collective study. This makes the volume more a testimony to a lost world, one not likely to return in upcoming years. So who and why should one read this book in its current format? Whilst being a testimony to a lost world, it has a great heuristic value in also telling us a story about our own blindness, slowness and lack of commitment to invest in the security of Europe in times of peace and welfare. In practice, the EU and its member states have not taken the initiative in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. This concerns both the evaluation of the conflict and the measures implemented. Instead of asking how to resolve the current conflict, the focus of the EU has been on the question of why things are as they are and how to reduce risks for their own communities. We have been busy talking about the need for European Strategic Autonomy as an alternative

to a trans-Atlantic security model, primarily not in the sense of doing something additional to NATO or the US, but to avoid contributing and being thus proud to be strategically ignorant. Accordingly, this book is more for policy makers of today and tomorrow to learn from the mistakes of the immediate past. But this edition should also as soon as possible be accompanied by a second updated volume indicating what deficits appeared following the Russian attack against Ukraine and European security in 2022 and how to secure the region as soon as possible, and in addition to this, how to avoid similar aggressions in the near future, both in cooperation with NATO or within the framework of European Strategic Autonomy.