



## The Necessity and Impossibility of “Strategic Autonomy”

*By Hans Kundnani*

WASHINGTON, DC — As the first anniversary of the inauguration of Donald Trump as president of the United States approaches, Europeans are still debating how to respond. The most fundamental question is about the U.S. security guarantee toward Europe, which Trump had radically questioned during the election campaign and even after winning it. After conspicuously failing to commit to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty at the NATO leaders meeting in Brussels in May, he finally did so a month later in the Rose Garden at the White House. So should Europeans now feel reassured that the uncertainty about Article 5 is over? Or should they quickly move toward “strategic autonomy” — just in case it turns out that they can no longer depend on the United States?

In Germany the debate has been framed as one between Atlanticists and “post-Atlanticists.” In October, a group of leading German foreign policy analysts (including Thomas Kleine-Brockhoff of GMF) published a manifesto, “In Spite of It All, America,” which warned that turning away from the United States “would bring insecurity to Germany and ultimately to Europe.” A reasonable policy toward the United States “must look beyond an exceptional period of U.S. skepticism toward any multilateral commitment” and “build a bridge into the post-Trump age.” In response, Jörg Lau and Bernd Ulrich of *Die Zeit* argued that the “transatlantic crisis

didn’t begin with Trump, and will not end with Trump” and that “the U.S. can no longer and will no longer be the stabilizer and protector of Europe.” Germany and Europe should therefore pursue a “post-Atlantic Western policy.”

In December German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel, a Social Democrat, gave a speech at the Körber Foundation in Berlin that seemed to many to identify him with the “post-Atlanticist” side of the debate. Actually, he was trying to have it both ways. He spoke of “the current withdrawal of United States under Trump from its role as a reliable guarantor of Western-influenced multilateralism” and emphasized that this trend would continue after Trump leaves office. “The fact that the U.S. is reducing its role in world affairs cannot be tied to the policies of a single president,” he said. But he also said that “the United States will remain our most important global partner” and that “we will need, and we will continue to nurture, this partnership.”

What the debate essentially revolves around is the idea of European “strategic autonomy.” The “post-Atlanticists” argue that “strategic autonomy” is necessary because of the uncertainty about the U.S. commitment to Europe — despite Trump’s statement in June. This idea of “strategic autonomy” is particularly popular in France. The Atlanticists, on the other hand,



worry that taking steps in the direction will exacerbate American disengagement (at a conference I attended in DC, American and European Atlanticists warned a French participant about the dangers of even using the phrase “strategic autonomy”) and say that “strategic autonomy” is in any case practically impossible. Thus Europeans have no choice but to continue to depend on the United States — despite the uncertainty.

The reality, Jana Puglierin and I argue in an essay published earlier this month, is that European “strategic autonomy” is both necessary and impossible. It is necessary, as the “post-Atlanticists” argue, because of the uncertainty about the commitment of the United States to its NATO Allies. But it is also impossible, as the Atlanticists argue, because, despite the current excitement about the progress in defense integration, the most Europeans will realistically be able to do, even in the medium term, is to increase their capacity to undertake interventions in their own neighborhood without U.S. help. As Gabriel put it in an interview with the Spiegel last week: “We are pleased that Donald Trump and the U.S. have affirmed Article 5, but we should not test that trust too much. At the same time, Europe could not defend itself without the U.S., even if European structures were strengthened.”

The views expressed in GMF publications and commentary are the views of the author alone.

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