

THE STRANGE CASE OF STRATEGIC AUTONOMY¹

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The modern genealogy of the concept of autonomy demonstrates the extreme difficulty of stabilizing a consensual definition or even referring the concept to a circumscribed domain.

In fact, autonomy begins as the condition of the exercise of sovereignty on the part of emerging nation-states, whose independence calls for the capacity for choosing their own policies freely or, in any case, without subordination to undue constraints. In Rousseau's view, the freedom of the State excludes any form of external dependency which may condition the general will of the political community: those who depend on others and do not control their own resources cannot be free.²

Autonomy then became the condition for the exercise of citizenship, restricted to individuals who can guarantee their subsistence on their own means without being inhibited by external factors, since this is the only way they can ensure the necessary independence to their status as co-legislators. In Kant's formula, the autonomy of political will calls for the independence (*Selbständigkeit*) of citizens who owe their existence not to the discretion of others, but to their own rights and powers as members of a republican community.³

In the last century, autonomy emerged as the condition of non-sovereign entities

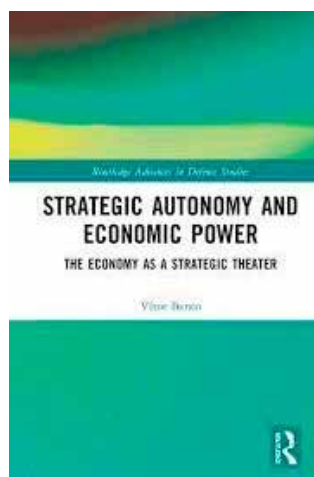
whose political independence is limited to domestic matters of federated states, associated states, colonial states or protectorates, those which do not have their own international personality. In Hannun and Lillich's definition, autonomy is determined by the degree of real or formal independence of the non-sovereign entity in its process of political decision making, which excludes foreign and defence policies normally reserved to central or national governments.⁴

Strategic autonomy, a benchmark in the contemporary national security doctrines

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of India, France or, more recently, Turkey, does not have stabilized conceptual, juridical or political definitions. Conceptual imprecision has increased in recent years, when European Union institutions decided to coopt the term to successively frame their defence policies, their health security and energy policies and their industrial policies.⁵

Immediately, ‘professional Europeanists’ invested deeply in the concept of strategic autonomy⁶ and, subsequently, in the search for ‘European sovereignty’, when President Emmanuel Macron and later the German governmental coalition started using that term in their official rhetoric.⁷ ‘European sovereignty’ is a semantic construction which is apparently necessary to give meaning to ‘European strategic autonomy’, the condition for the emergence of a supra-national entity with the legitimacy to prevail over the national sovereignty of the European Union member-states. This exercise was interrupted by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and, clashing with reality, European strategic autonomy ended before it had even begun.⁸

As T. S. Eliot said in relation to democracy, when a term is universally sanctified it stops having meaning since it has too many meanings.⁹ Vítor Bento decided to define and operationalize the concept of strategic autonomy of states in the first monograph published to date on this problem.¹⁰

Strategic autonomy is the condition that determines the degree of freedom of political decision making that is necessary to ensure the survival of the state in the anarchical order of the international system.

Vítor Bento begins by making a crucial distinction: strategic autonomy is not state sovereignty or national independence, but it does not cease to be the condition of existence of a sovereign political entity. Independence and sovereignty are binary situations, whereas autonomy is gradual and variable¹¹ – it is a matter of degree and, above all, a process of accumulation of the instruments of power that are indispensable to ensure the fulfilment of the achievable ends chosen by political decision making.

The author’s priority is to operationalize the concept of autonomy along five dimensions: power, which defines the field of possibilities of strategic action; resources, which place limits on available means; efficacy and efficiency, which condition the conversion of capacities into instruments of power; the circumstances imposed by the international system, which determine which means are more relevant; and the temporal horizon, which shapes existing opportunities and the state’s response capacity to external conditionalities. In these terms, strategic autonomy is the leeway of the state ‘to choose, adopt and pursue its goals in a relevant period, taking into account available capacities and its efficacy in existing circumstances’.¹²

This definition is supplemented by an additional distinction between strategic autonomy and political autonomy: the first is a set of goals which defines the frame of possibilities and limits available choices; the second is the freedom of choice on the part of political decisionmakers to guide the state according to their own priorities and preferences or, in Mearsheimer’s

formulation, which the author cites, the autonomy of the decision making process of the state.¹³

The most original part of this definition is the importance given to the temporal dimension, which is normally forgotten in strategic studies. Time is the most dynamic dimension in international relations – ‘the whole world is made of change’ – and decisively conditions the strategies of states. The author’s rule of thumb stipulates that, the shorter the available time, the greater will be the state’s dependency in relation to external circumstances; the longer the available time, the smaller will be its dependency in relation to external conditionalities and the greater will be its opportunities to accumulate resources.¹⁴

In addition, in the international system where uncertainty is the only certainty, the state must preserve the maximum amount of resources to guarantee its autonomy in the response to strategic surprises.¹⁵

Vítor Bento’s constant concern is with small states, notably the asymmetrical relationships between a poor state and a rich neighbour state – besides Portugal, there are few states that have one larger state as their only neighbour. In this context, the distinction between ‘conditioned autonomy’ and ‘full autonomy’ is relevant: the former results from the need to rely on allies, not only to enhance available resources and expand the state’s strategic autonomy, but also to ensure survival in times of war; the latter pertains to sovereign control over all instruments of power which sustain the state’s strategic autonomy.¹⁶

The author’s main thesis is the crucial importance of the economy, not only to

guarantee the state’s strategic autonomy, but also as the main stage for the competition between states in the international system in times of peace. Strategic autonomy depends upon the size of the economy, usually measured by gross domestic product, its insertion in trade and technological networks and its financial quality – the sovereign debts crises highlighted the importance of financial stability, and the excessive burden of debt is a permanent constraint on a state’s strategic autonomy and its international credibility, even in the case of a nuclear power like France. In this context, economic growth is a permanent priority of the state, one which depends upon three levers: physical capital, human capital and productive efficiency.¹⁷

Vítor Bento’s assumption is that the central role of the economy in the definition of the balance of power tends to become permanent, given that nuclear weapons make it less likely that states will resort to war to solve their differences, and it is more likely – and wise – to concentrate competition in the economic domain, which thus replaces the primacy of the military domain.¹⁸ In this context, the return of war has two consequences, with the sidelining of the economic dimension of state competition, which tends to be subordinated to the logics of war in a state of exception, and with the changes in the nature of conflict, a duel whose result has existential consequences for the contenders.

The book ends with the analysis of two paradigmatic cases – the postwar national strategies of Germany and China.¹⁹ Vítor Bento underscores the elective affinities between the two continental powers: two processes of reconstruction of countries

whose strategic autonomy was drastically reduced in the Second World War; two states divided by the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War; and two economies focused on exports. In both cases, beyond their political divergences and the differences in circumstances, Beijing's communist regime and the democratic regime of the Federal Republic converge in showing

the centrality of the economy to restore the strategic autonomy of two powers. That history is not over yet. The rise of China can not only anticipate the moment when its economy overcomes that of the United States, but also make the main continental power of our time inherit the imperialist expansion programme that dominated Germany and Russia successively in the twentieth century. ^{Rel}

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ENDNOTES

¹ A previous version of this paper was published in Portuguese in the journal *Relações Internacionais*, No. 78, June 2023.

² HOFFMANN, Stanley; FIDLER, David, eds. – *Rousseau on International Relations*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991, pp. XXXI–XXXVII; ROUSSEAU, Jean-Jacques – 'Project de Constitution pour la Corse' (1765). In ROUSSEAU, Jean-Jacques – *Oeuvres complètes III. Le contrat social. Ecrits politiques*. Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1964, p. 903.

³ KANT, Immanuel – 'Métaphysique des moeurs' (1795). In KANT, Immanuel – *Oeuvres philosophiques III*. Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1986, p. 179; REISS, Hans, ed. – *Kant. Political Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 25, 27.

⁴ HANNUN, Horst; LILLICH, Richard – 'The concept of autonomy in international law'. In *American Journal of International Law*. Vol. 74, No. 4, 1980, pp. 860, 888–90; HANNUN, Horst – *Autonomy, Sovereignty and Self-Determination*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996.

⁵ One can identify 'four waves' in the development of 'European strategic autonomy', since the Saint-Malo summit to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. HELWIG, Niklas; SINKKONEN, Ville – 'Strategic autonomy and the EU as a global actor: the evolution, debate

and theory of a contested term'. In *European Foreign Affairs Review*. No. 27, 2022, pp. 1–20.

⁶ The reference to 'professional Europeanists' should not be taken as pejorative, despite the overzealous approach of a minority who wants to reduce Europe to the European Union. Some of the best contributions are: ARTEAGA, Felix – 'Autonomia estratégica y la defensa europea'. Real Instituto Elcano. 11 October 2017. Available at: <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/ analisis/la-autonomia-estrategica-y-la-defensa-europea/>; FIOTT, Daniel – 'Strategic Autonomy. Towards "European Sovereignty" in Defence?'. European Union Institute for Strategic Studies. 2018. Available at: <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/strategic-autonomy-towards-%E2%80%99european-sovereignty%E2%80%99-defence>; GREVI, Giovanni – 'Strategic Autonomy for European Choices. The key to Europe's shaping power'. Discussion paper, European Policy Center. 19 July 2019. Available at: https://www.epc.eu/content/PDF/2019/190719_Strategicautonomy_GG.pdf; HOWORTH, Jolyon – 'Autonomy and Strategy. What Should Europe Want?'. Security Policy Briefs, Egmont Institute. 9 April 2019. Available at: <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/autonomy-and-strategy-what-should-europe-want/>; TOCCI, Nathalie – 'European Strategic Autonomy. What It Is, Why We Need it, How to Achieve It'. Istituto Affari Internazionali. 26 February 2021. Available at: <https://www.iai.it/en/publicazioni/european-strategic-autonomy-what-it-is-why-we-need-it-how-to-achieve-it>;

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⁷ 'INITIATIVE POUR L'EUROPE – Discours d'Emmanuel Macron pour une Europe souveraine, unie, démocratique'. Paris. 26 September 2017; *DARE MORE PROGRESS. Alliance for Freedom, Justice, and Sustainability. Coalition Agreement between the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), Alliance 90/The Greens, and the Free Democrats (FDP) 2021–2025*. Berlin: SPD, DE/GR UENE, DE/FDP, DE, 7 December 2021.

⁸ Sten Rynning in DEMPSEY, Judy – 'Is European Strategic Autonomy Over?'. Carnegie Europe. 19 January 2023. Available at: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/88838>.

⁹ ELIOT, T. S. – *The Idea of a Christian Society*. London: Faber, 1939, pp. 14–15.

¹⁰ BENTO, Vitor – *Strategic Autonomy and Economic Power. The Economy as a Strategic Theater*. London: Routledge, 2022. The book,

which results from the author's doctoral thesis, is the first non-collective volume published on the question of strategic autonomy that is not focused on European strategic autonomy.

11 *Ibidem*, pp. 67, 218.

12 *Ibidem*, p. 65.

13 *Ibidem*, p. 67; MEARSHEIMER, John – *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2001.

14 BENTO, Vítor – *Strategic Autonomy and Economic Power...*, p. 73.

15 *Ibidem*, p. 212.

16 *Ibidem*, pp. 67, 214.

17 *Ibidem*, pp. 79-80, 214-15.

18 *Ibidem*, pp. 209-10.

19 *Ibidem*, pp. 171-208.

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