

The European Union and Strategic Autonomy: Political, Economic and Technological Challenges

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Abstract

This paper explores the potentialities and constraints of building the European Union's strategic autonomy in a new geopolitical era marked by the rivalry between the United States and China, the weakening of the multilateral order, and the consequences of the war in Ukraine. The authors primarily focus on the political, economic, and technological dimensions of autonomy, utilising relevant scientific methods within an interdisciplinary research framework, primarily the analytical-synthetic method, content and comparative analysis, as well as the scenario approach. The findings indicate that the EU is capable of progressively reducing its dependency through the diversification of resources, investments in development, research, and innovation, and the strengthening of digital and technological sovereignty. Simultaneously, however, the Union faces serious limitations, the fiscal constraints of the Member States, the fragmentation of its foreign and security policy, and a persistent reliance on the United States in the area of defence. The EU's future position will therefore hinge on its ability to consolidate its economic and technological potential and transform it into a unified political will and a credible geopolitical power.

KEYWORDS: *Security and defence policy of the European Union, new geopolitical era, challenges, fragmentation, integration.*

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1. Introduction

The European Union found itself at one of the most fundamental crossroads in its history after 2022. The war in Ukraine, unleashed by the Russian Federation, fundamentally disrupted the European security order and triggered a new type of geopolitical uncertainty that transcends the boundaries of traditional security threats. This conflict has not only tested the Union's cohesion and capacity for action but has also dramatically highlighted its dependence on external actors—be it in the field of security and defence, or in energy, technology, and the economy. The role of non-military means has increased in achieving political and strategic goals [1]. In many cases, their effectiveness exceeds that of weapon systems [2]. The multipolar environment in which the EU operates today is characterised by concurrent great power rivalry, the fragmentation of the global order, an increase in hybrid threats, and the weakening of multilateral institutions that have long guaranteed stability [3].

The EU is currently perceived as an economic giant, yet simultaneously a political dwarf and a militarily dependent actor [4]. While these characteristics have been the subject of increasing criticism in recent years, the current crisis presents a historic opportunity to redefine the Union's role [5]. The debate surrounding 'strategic autonomy' has therefore shifted from abstract discussions among academics and European institutions to the centre of political and public discourse. The question of the extent to which the Union is capable of acting independently of external partners has acquired a new dimension, not as a luxurious political ambition, but as a necessary prerequisite for survival and prosperity in an environment of global rivalry [6,7].

The current state of knowledge in this area suggests that the concept of strategic autonomy is not uniformly defined. For some, it is an aspiration for complete self-sufficiency and independence; for others, it is the capacity to make decisions and enforce them without undue reliance on other actors.

Academic literature frequently underscores the dilemma between the normative and pragmatic understanding of autonomy, between autonomy as a value-driven project of European integration and autonomy as a practical tool for survival in a competitive geopolitical environment [8,9]. Analytical documents, such as the Munich Security Report [10], The Future European Security Architecture [11], and The New EU Innovation Agenda [12], underline that the challenges associated with strategic autonomy extend beyond the security sphere to encompass economic resilience, technological innovation, and the ability to diversify global partnerships. The ability of states to respond to sudden changes and current threats affecting them also reflects their level of crisis management [13].

Methodologically, this paper relies on an interdisciplinary approach. It employs the analytical-synthetic method in combining knowledge from political science, international relations, economics, and security studies. The analysis also incorporates content and comparative methods, which allow for the comparison of European approaches with those of other global actors, particularly the US and China. A scenario-based approach is also utilised to identify potential trajectories for the future development of European strategic autonomy, alongside a critical analysis and interpretation of primary and secondary sources, including EU strategic documents, security reports, and academic studies.

2. The Political Dimension of the EU's Strategic Autonomy

The Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022 represents a historical watershed in both European and global politics. The invasion dramatically disrupted the security order based on the principles of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act and on the norms of international law, which had been considered the bedrock of stability in Europe since the end of the Cold War. The European Union found itself in a situation where it was no longer sufficient to act merely as a normative power or an economic giant, it became imperative to demonstrate the capacity to respond to a crisis that directly threatened the fundamental values and security of the European continent [3,14].

The war in Ukraine acted as a catalyst for the discussion surrounding the Union's strategic autonomy. While prior to 2022 the concept appeared primarily in programme documents or academic studies, its outbreak propelled it to the centre of political decision-making. It became apparent that European states were incapable of confronting a major conventional military threat independently, and that their capabilities in the fields of military production, logistics, and supply had been chronically under-resourced. The dependency on the United States for intelligence, command and control, and military supplies was so pronounced that it became the subject of intense debate not only among politicians but also among academics and the public [15].

This situation highlighted a fundamental paradox of the European project: the EU is the world's second-largest economy, yet in the area of defence and security, it remains profoundly reliant on NATO, and especially on the United States [4,16]. Simultaneously, the war in Ukraine demonstrated that the ability to act autonomously is not an abstract political ambition, but a matter of survival and maintaining the credibility of European integration. Autonomy began to be viewed not only as an ideal but also as a pragmatic necessity, be it in the sphere of energy self-sufficiency, supply chain resilience, technological independence, or in the political sphere of the ability to react in a unified and effective manner [17].

Although the EU's reaction to the Russian aggression was surprisingly unified in many respects, the imposition of unprecedented sanctions against Moscow, support for Ukraine via the European Peace Facility (EPF), and massive financial and humanitarian aid, it simultaneously exposed the Union's limitations. Initial shocks in the field of energy security revealed that Member States were extremely reliant on Russian gas and oil. Furthermore, limited military production capacity exposed Europe's unpreparedness for a long-term conventional conflict in its immediate neighbourhood. These factors collectively shifted the debate on strategic autonomy from the theoretical realm into reality [18].

In this context, the question arose as to the extent to which it is possible to build the political dimension of autonomy in parallel with the military and technological dimensions. Political autonomy signifies not only the capacity to ensure one's defence but also the ability to act on the global stage as a unified and respected actor. The war in Ukraine showed that if the EU fails to act in a coordinated manner, it loses influence in decision-making processes that fundamentally affect its own security and prosperity. Strategic autonomy has thus become the framework through which not only the Union's security policy but also its economic and energy policies are being re-evaluated.

Transatlantic relations have always been one of the main pillars of European security. Throughout the Cold War and subsequently, NATO, and specifically the United States, guaranteed a security umbrella that enabled European states to concentrate on economic integration and development [19]. However, the war in Ukraine once again served as a reminder of the depth of European reliance on American military presence, strategic command, and the defence industry. Most advanced weapon systems, satellite infrastructure, and key air defence capabilities and capacities utilised by Ukraine originate, either directly or indirectly, from the US. Furthermore, the intelligence data that played a crucial role in the initial months of the conflict were predominantly provided by American agencies.

This situation raises fundamental questions about the limits of European autonomy. On the one hand, the majority of NATO member states, which are also EU members, underscore the necessity of preserving transatlantic ties as the

fundamental guarantee of security. Notably, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe - Poland, the Baltic States, Romania, view the United States as the sole reliable protector against the Russian threat. On the other hand, France, and to some extent Germany, advocate for a vision of greater European sovereignty and the development of capabilities independent of Washington. This dichotomy constitutes one of the key political barriers to strategic autonomy [7].

The reliance on the US also has a broader political dimension. Washington has long maintained a dominant position not only in the military sphere but also in strategic decision-making. The European Union is thus often compelled to align its foreign and security policy with American priorities, whether concerning relations with China, the Middle East, or issues of technological security. For many European policymakers, this situation is increasingly difficult to accept, as it erodes the EU's ability to pursue its own interests independently of the United States. Autonomy therefore also becomes an issue of political self-identification, to what extent the Union wishes and is able to act as an autonomous actor in a multipolar world [6].

Conversely, it cannot be ignored that US military and technological superiority is currently irreplaceable. The war in Ukraine demonstrated that without American supplies of weapons, ammunition, intelligence support, and financial aid, Kyiv would have been unable to sustain its defence [20]. This fact weakens the arguments of those advocating for a rapid decoupling of European security from American security. More realistic approaches emphasise the need for complementarity, that is, strengthening European capabilities within the NATO framework, rather than outside it. In this sense, strategic autonomy is understood not as complete independence, but as an enhanced capacity for the EU to act in cases where the United States lacks the will or capacity to intervene [21].

However, political will is also a limit to autonomy. Not all Member States are prepared to invest in building common defence capabilities, as they continue to prioritise bilateral ties with the United States or rely on existing NATO mechanisms. This leads to a situation where strategic autonomy becomes the subject of ideological disputes among European elites, rather than a shared project of the entire Union [22].

The stance of the United States is also a challenge. Although Washington officially supports a stronger Europe, in practice it also pursues its own interests. In some instances, the US administration is concerned that excessive European autonomy could weaken transatlantic ties and create an alternative centre of power whose activities might not always be consonant with American priorities [23]. This ambivalence contributes to uncertainty and reduces the predictability of transatlantic cooperation.

One of the greatest obstacles on the path to the European Union's political and strategic autonomy is its internal fragmentation. Despite years of integration, institutional interconnectedness, and declared unity, the EU remains a grouping of 27 Member States that often pursue divergent geopolitical interests. Differences are evident not only in approaches to security issues but also to economic policy, energy security, and relations with global actors such as China, Russia, or the United States [24].

The war in Ukraine has further accentuated these disparities. While the states on the Union's Eastern Flank perceived the Russian threat as existential even before 2022 and called for a tougher stance against Moscow, several countries in Western and Southern Europe showed greater caution, motivated by economic interests or historical experiences. Although the EU was able to swiftly approve a series of sanction packages after February 2022 and demonstrated unity on key issues, the decision-making process was accompanied by complex negotiations and compromises that highlighted the limits of the consensual model in the field of foreign and security policy [17].

This fragmentation is not only apparent in relation to Russia. Similar discrepancies are discernible in the definition of policy towards China. While some Member States - notably Germany, but also Hungary and Greece, have strong economic ties with Beijing and seek to maintain pragmatic cooperation, others such as Lithuania and the Czech Republic have unequivocally sided with the US on the issue of technological and values-based rivalry. These divergences impede the establishment of a unified position, which diminishes the EU's credibility as an actor capable of confronting global challenges [24].

Integration in the area of foreign and security policy is hampered by structural limits. Decision-making at the level of the EU Council still requires unanimity on many issues, which provides individual states with the opportunity to block or significantly slow down the adoption of decisions. This mechanism is increasingly criticised, as it allows the particular interests of small or medium-sized states to prevail over the strategic interests of the Union as a whole. While the discussion about transitioning to Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) in the realm of foreign policy is present, it continues to meet resistance from several Member States wary of losing their sovereignty.

Despite these obstacles, the war in Ukraine also demonstrated the EU's capacity to mobilise resources and act in unison when its very existence is threatened. The rapid adoption of sanctions, coordination in the field of energy diversification, and joint gas purchases represent examples of the Union's potential effectiveness in crisis situations. This fact suggests that fragmentation is not irreversible, but that it necessitates political leadership, the capacity for compromise, and the long-term building of trust among Member States.

Moreover, integration is imperative if the EU is to become an autonomous and relevant actor in a multipolar world. No single Member State, including the largest such as Germany or France, possesses sufficient resources to compete independently with global powers. Only a unified and consolidated Union can mobilise the economic, technological, and political potential required to pursue its interests independently and credibly. In this context, the political dimension of strategic autonomy appears as a test of the very essence of the European integration project, a question of whether the EU can overcome its internal contradictions and act as a unified subject in global politics [9].

European strategic political autonomy reflects the need for Europe to strengthen its defence capabilities in response to weakening nuclear arms control, intensifying great-power rivalry, and uncertainty surrounding external nuclear deterrence guarantees, particularly given that France is the only EU member state possessing nuclear weapons [25]. In recent years, strategic autonomy has established itself as one of the most debated political catchphrases in European policy. Its popularity stems from several sources: the growing uncertainty in the world order, experience with financial, migration, and health crises, increasing reliance on external actors in energy and technologies, and, crucially, the experience of the war in Ukraine. On a political level, autonomy has become a symbol of the aspiration for greater sovereignty and self-reliance for the European Union, not only in the areas of security and defence but also in the economy, technologies, and societal resilience [26].

As a political project, strategic autonomy carries both its appeal and its risks. For its proponents, it is a vision of transforming the EU from an economic giant into a genuine geopolitical actor, capable of asserting its own interests in a multipolar world. This vision follows the French tradition of strategic sovereignty, which President Emmanuel Macron systematically promotes as the core of the European political project. In his understanding, autonomy means that Europe must be capable of deciding and acting independently when the situation demands it, whether in military, technological, or diplomatic matters [27].

However, the reality is more complex. The Union's political autonomy is contingent upon the willingness of Member States to relinquish a portion of their national competences in favour of common European institutions. Yet, the logic of sovereignty continues to dominate the field of foreign and security policy, leading to the requirement for unanimity and compromise for final decisions. This significantly slows down the capacity for action and erodes the credibility of the EU as a political actor. Internal contradictions between states that advocate for deeper integration and those that insist on national control thus constitute a fundamental impediment to the realisation of the autonomy vision.

A further complication is the divergent interpretation of the concept itself. For France, autonomy means independence from the United States and the building of its own capabilities. For the states of Central and Eastern Europe, conversely, autonomy is viewed with suspicion—they fear it could weaken NATO and undermine the transatlantic bond, which they consider existential. For Germany, autonomy is more of an economic than a military project, focused on resilience and the stability of supply chains. These varied interpretations complicate the adoption of a unified strategy, transforming autonomy into a political slogan whose specific content shifts depending on its user [28,21].

Strategic autonomy is therefore a project that balances between vision and reality. The vision is ambitious: to transform the EU into a truly geopolitical actor that is not merely a passive recipient of decisions made by other great powers. The reality, however, is marked by internal contradictions, dependencies, and a deficit of political will. Nevertheless, autonomy cannot be reduced to an empty slogan—the very fact that it has become a central concept in the European political debate indicates its mobilising potential. It serves as a framework through which the EU re-evaluates its position in the world and redefines its future [9,21,23].

If autonomy is to be a viable political project, it will need to undergo a process of concretion and operationalisation. This means not only clearly defining what autonomy entails in individual domains - security, economic, technological, but also securing the mechanisms that enable its practical implementation. Without these steps, there is a risk that it will remain a political vision that inspires but fails to deliver tangible results.

3. The Economic and Technological Foundations of European Autonomy

The European Union's economic resilience has, since 2022, become one of the main prerequisites for the sustainability of its political and security ambitions. The war in Ukraine and the subsequent energy crisis demonstrated the dangers of unilateral dependencies on external suppliers. The dramatic drop in Russian gas and oil supplies revealed that energy security is not merely a technical or economic issue, but a fundamental factor of political sovereignty. For many EU Member States, particularly in Central Europe and Germany, the interruption of Russian energy supplies was a shock that exposed profound structural vulnerability [29].

The Union's response to this crisis led to fundamental steps towards the diversification of energy sources and the building of more resilient supply chains [30,31]. Joint gas purchases, the accelerated construction of LNG terminals, investments in renewable sources, and the development of hydrogen technologies demonstrated the EU's ability to act swiftly and in a coordinated manner when faced with an existential threat. This process simultaneously tested its capacity to link short-term reactions with long-term strategic objectives, particularly the aspiration for climate neutrality by 2050 [32,33]. However, energy security is not the only area where dependencies have become problematic. The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent global shocks demonstrated that the EU is also overly reliant on the import of critical raw materials, semiconductors, and pharmaceutical products. Supply chains, which for decades had been optimised under the logic of efficiency and low costs, proved to be fragile and susceptible to disruption. The reliance on China for the supply of rare earth minerals or on the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) for chip production has become a geopolitical vulnerability [34]. The reduction of these dependencies is now viewed as part of the broader concept of “open strategic autonomy”, which the European Commission has promoted since 2020. The goal is not complete self-sufficiency but the diversification of partners and the creation of capacities in areas that are strategically essential for the functioning of the economy and security. This requires not only investments in infrastructure and technologies but also political coordination among Member States, which often have divergent national priorities [35].

The building of economic resilience thus becomes the cornerstone of strategic autonomy. If the EU fails to reduce its reliance on external suppliers of energy, critical raw materials, and technological components, it will be hard-pressed to assert its interests independently. Experiences from recent years indicate that the question of autonomy cannot be separated from the economy's ability to absorb and adapt to shocks while simultaneously supporting the Union's long-term political goals [26]. If the European Union is to succeed in its pursuit of strategic autonomy, investment in research, development, and innovation remains one of the key areas. Modern geopolitics is increasingly shaped by technological superiority and the capacity to translate scientific potential into practical applications in industry, defence, and society. In this context, a comparison with the US and China is imperative, as these two states represent the EU's largest global competitors [24].

The United States has maintained a dominant position in innovation for decades due to a strong link between the academic sphere, the private sector, and the state. Massive investments in R&D, which have long surpassed 3% of GDP, enable the US to maintain its leading position in key technological fields such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), biotechnologies, nanotechnologies, and space programmes. Moreover, the American model is bolstered by an attractive innovation ecosystem that draws talent from across the globe [36].

China has, over the last two decades, become a technological rival to the US, thanks to strategically managed investments and ambitious state programmes. Initiatives such as "Made in China 2025" or "China Standards 2035" are focused on building a dominant position in areas of key importance to the global economy and security. Chinese R&D expenditure today reaches more than 2.5 % of GDP, and the country systematically invests in Artificial Intelligence (AI), quantum technologies, 5G networks, and its space programme. The result is a rapid shift from the position of the "world's factory" to that of a technological innovator [24].

The EU lags behind in this comparison. Although R&D expenditure in the Union averages around 2.2 % of GDP, there are significant disparities between individual Member States. Countries such as Germany, Sweden, and Finland invest more than 3 % of GDP in innovation, while other states, particularly in Southeast Europe, lag significantly below 1 %. This uneven development undermines the Union's ability to act as a unified technological player and contributes to the fragmentation of the European innovation space [37]. While several initiatives have been adopted at the EU level to support joint research and development, their scope remains limited compared to the US and China. The European innovation ecosystem is often criticised for excessive bureaucratisation, an insufficient capacity to commercialise research results, and a weak link between universities and industry. Consequently, many European innovations only succeed secondarily, or their commercial utilisation takes place outside Europe.

A comparison with the US and China thus indicates that the EU's key problem is not solely the absolute level of investment, but also its structure and effectiveness. There is a lack of sufficient coordination between Member States, leading to the duplication of projects and an inadequate exploitation of synergies. They directly affect the planning and implementation of them such as, for example military mobility [38,39,40]. In the environment of global technological rivalry, the Union cannot afford to waste resources. If it wishes to reduce its reliance on external actors and build its own autonomy, it must find a way to consolidate its innovation capacities and support the development of key technologies that will form the basis of future geopolitical power [26].

Digital and technological sovereignty has, in recent years, become one of the main pillars of the European Union's strategic autonomy. In an environment where geopolitical rivalry increasingly takes place in cyberspace, data flows, and interconnected networks, the ability to control and develop one's own technologies becomes a matter of security [41], economic prosperity, and political independence [42]. Artificial Intelligence (AI) serves as an example of a key technology in this respect, one that will fundamentally influence the future global balance of power. The United States and China are investing enormous resources in the development and implementation of AI, competing not only over economic applications but also over its use in defence, intelligence, and cybersecurity. Although the European Union possesses a high-quality academic base and several excellent research centres, its capacity to translate research potential into practical innovations lags behind. Regulation, which is traditionally an EU strength, represents a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it increases public trust and promotes an ethical framework for the use of AI; on the other, it may slow the pace of innovation compared to the more flexible approaches of the US and China [43].

Cybersecurity is another key area of digital sovereignty. The EU is regularly exposed to cyber-attacks from both state and non-state actors, which threaten critical infrastructure, public institutions, and private companies [44,45]. The COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine demonstrated that cyber operations are an integral component of hybrid strategies designed to destabilise societies and undermine confidence in democratic institutions. While the European Union has adopted several framework strategies, including the NIS2 Directive and initiatives within the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA), the capacities of the Member States remain highly uneven. While some countries, such as Estonia and the Netherlands, rank among the world leaders in cyber protection, others remain significantly vulnerable. This imbalance complicates the building of a unified European cyber defence policy [46,47].

Space technologies represent another dimension of technological autonomy. Modern military and economic systems are increasingly reliant on satellite infrastructure—from navigation and communication to surveillance and meteorological services. In this respect, the European Union has built up significant capacities through the Galileo and Copernicus programmes, which provide strategically independent services in navigation and Earth observation. Despite this, Europe remains highly dependent on American, and in some cases Chinese, capabilities, particularly concerning military applications and the commercial space sector. The competitiveness of European companies, such as Arianespace, is threatened by the growing influence of American private giants like SpaceX, which can combine flexibility, innovation, and significantly lower costs [48,49,50].

Unmanned systems are another key area for strengthening Europe's strategic autonomy. Rapid advances in aerial, ground, and navy platforms offer military and humanitarian applications [51], but development remains fragmented across Member States. Greater coordination and investment could enhance capabilities and reduce reliance on external suppliers, making unmanned systems a pillar of European technological independence.

Digital and technological sovereignty therefore represents one of the key challenges for the EU. If the Union is to succeed in its pursuit of strategic autonomy, it must build its own capacities in Artificial Intelligence, cybersecurity, and space technologies, and unmanned systems, necessitating significant investment, better coordination among Member States, and strengthened partnerships with industry. Failing this, Europe will continue to risk remaining technologically dependent on external powers, which will undermine its ability to pursue an independent policy.

One of the greatest risks to building the economic and technological foundations of the EU's strategic autonomy is the insufficient level of investment and the persistent fiscal constraints of the Member States. While there has been a marked increase in the political will to strengthen European capabilities and capacities in defence, innovation, and energy since 2022, the reality of national budgets often makes it impossible to translate these ambitions into practice.

The war in Ukraine has compelled many EU countries to increase their defence spending, which imposes an additional burden on public finances. Concurrently, the rising costs of the energy transition, social policies, and recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic create pressure on national budgets, many of which are already significantly in deficit. Consequently, there is a risk that investments in research, development, and technological infrastructure will be perceived as secondary, even though these are crucial for Europe's long-term resilience and competitiveness [52].

A further problem is the uneven capacity of Member States to fund strategic projects. While Germany, France, and Northern European countries possess larger fiscal reserves and are able to support extensive innovation programmes, countries in Southeastern Europe or those with high levels of indebtedness have limited options. This disparity leads to the threat of deepening technological inequalities within the Union, which subsequently weakens its overall cohesion and its ability to act in a unified manner [52].

Insufficient investment is also evident in specific sectors. For instance, the European defence industry has long suffered from underfunding and fragmentation. While the US can consolidate its defence industry within a few major corporations, Europe has hundreds of smaller enterprises that often compete with each other rather than creating synergies. This leads to the duplication of programmes, higher costs, and weaker innovative capacity [53,54].

Similarly, in the field of digital technologies and AI, the EU finds itself in a situation where it possesses high-quality human capital and research centres but cannot secure sufficient financial resources for the transition from research to practical application. Consequently, many European start-ups seek funding in the US or Asia, which weakens the innovation ecosystem in Europe and increases the risk of brain drain [55,56].

Moreover, fiscal constraints create political tension between Member States. While some countries call for more flexible rules for financing joint projects and a greater role for the EU in supporting them, others insist on strict fiscal discipline and reject significant indebtedness at the Union level. This dispute complicates decision-making on joint investments in critical infrastructure and innovations that could strengthen collective autonomy [26,24,57].

If strategic autonomy is to be a realistic goal, these limits will need to be overcome through new financial mechanisms and greater coordination. This requires not only greater involvement of the private sector but also the willingness of Member States to support common European projects that transcend the scope of their national interests. Otherwise, the EU risks remaining trapped in a vicious circle of ambition without sufficient resources for its realisation.

4. Global Challenges and Partnerships in a Multipolar World

In the multipolar world, the European Union finds itself in an environment of increasingly complex power dynamics that are transforming its traditional position and demanding more flexible strategies. The rivalry between the United States and China, the aggressive behaviour of Russia, and the rise of other actors, including the states grouped within BRICS+, fundamentally affect the geopolitical equilibrium and test the EU's ability to maintain its relevance on the global stage. Relations with the United States remain crucial, yet their asymmetrical nature is increasingly evident. While the transatlantic partnership provides the EU with security guarantees and economic cooperation, it simultaneously limits its capacity to pursue independent policies. Washington expects Europe to align with its strategic priorities, whether concerning its approach to China, the Middle East, or technological standards. This presents the EU with a dilemma: how to preserve transatlantic unity while simultaneously building the space for autonomous decision-making [58].

China represents a partner, a competitor, and a systemic rival to the EU simultaneously. On the one hand, Beijing is an indispensable trading partner, key for the supply of technologies, raw materials, and market opportunities. On the other, it is increasingly emerging as a normative adversary that promotes authoritarian models of governance and actively undermines the liberal international order. The EU is compelled to balance between its economic interests and its values-based anchoring, which complicates its ability to formulate a consistent strategy towards China [59].

Russia, even after being weakened by the war in Ukraine, remains a destabilising actor. Its aggressive policy has not only challenged the post-war security architecture of Europe but has also demonstrated that hybrid and military tools can be effectively used against open democratic societies. For the EU, this means a long-term challenge that requires a combination of deterrence, resilience, and diplomatic strategies [15,16].

An important part of the new power dynamics is the rise of the Global South states and the formation of alternative blocs such as BRICS+. To many of these countries, the EU appears more as a trading partner than as a geopolitical leader.

This raises the question of whether the Union can offer an attractive vision of cooperation that transcends economic benefits and includes a normative or technological dimension. Failing this, it risks its influence in the developing world being marginalised in favour of China or other regional powers [60]. The EU thus faces a multipolar reality in which it can no longer rely on a stable framework based on transatlantic dominance and the liberal order. It is compelled to redefine its position among the great powers and seek new forms of partnerships and coalitions that would allow it to preserve global significance. The current multipolar world is characterised not only by great power rivalry but also by intense contestation dynamics that weaken traditional forms of cooperation and create new lines of conflict. For the European Union, these disputes represent a fundamental challenge, as they undermine its capacity to pursue a values-driven policy and affect its standing in the global architecture. On a territorial level, the contestation dynamics are most visible in Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, which challenged the fundamental principles of border inviolability and state sovereignty. This conflict is of an existential nature for the EU, as it is unfolding directly on its borders and testing its capacity to defend not only its neighbours but also its own security identity [11]. Simultaneously, it raises the question of the extent to which the EU is prepared to respond to similar challenges in other regions, such as the Balkans, the Caucasus, or the Mediterranean [61], where latent territorial disputes remain present.

Normative contestation is reflected in the dispute over fundamental values and models of governance. Authoritarian powers like China and Russia openly question the universality of human rights, the rule of law, and democratic legitimacy. They offer alternative models that are becoming attractive to parts of the Global South, weary of Western paternalism and an unequal economic order. For the EU, which built its identity as a "normative power", this development is exceptionally demanding. It is forced to confront the dilemma of whether to insist on values-based principles, even at the risk of losing geopolitical influence, or to adopt a more pragmatic approach, which could, however, weaken its internal coherence [62]. Issue-specific contestation takes place in sectors crucial for the future global balance of power—energy, technology, trade, and climate policy. In energy, we see competition for control over the supply of oil, gas, and critical raw materials. In the technological sphere, the dispute centres on norms and standards in Artificial Intelligence, cybersecurity, and 5G networks. In trade, disputes over protectionism, subsidies, and fair competition continue. The climate agenda is becoming a site of clash between industrialised countries and the developing world, which demands greater equity in distributing the costs of decarbonisation.

These contestation dynamics significantly limit the EU's room for manoeuvre. On the one hand, the Union is bound by its values-based identity, which distinguishes it from other powers. On the other, it must react pragmatically to changing circumstances to maintain geopolitical relevance. In practice, this means the EU often finds itself in the position of a mediator or norm-setter, attempting to establish the rules of the international system but not always able to ensure their enforcement. The contestation dynamics thus expose the limits of its normative power while simultaneously highlighting the necessity of coupling a values-based approach with real capabilities and resilience [63,64]. The gradual transformation of the global order towards multipolarity places the European Union in a position where being merely an economic giant and a normative actor is no longer sufficient. If it is to influence the shaping of the new global architecture, it must be capable of combining values-based strength with real political, economic, and technological capacities. This is a demanding task, as the EU balances between the pursuit of autonomy and a persistent reliance on its partners, particularly the United States [21].

On the one hand, the Union has the ambition to act as an independent actor capable of offering an alternative to great power rivalries. It bases its legitimacy on the ability to pursue multilateral solutions, support international institutions, and enforce norms founded on the rule of law, human rights, and sustainability. These aspects lend it a distinctive identity in a global system increasingly dominated by the logic of power [65,66]. On the other hand, reality shows that the EU remains dependent in many areas. In the security domain, it is reliant on US military capabilities, which provide the core of deterrence within NATO. In the technological field, it lags behind the US and China, forcing it to rely on the import of critical components, standards, and innovations. In the economic sphere, while it possesses a vast internal market, its strength is diminished by internal disparities and limited fiscal coordination [67,68]. This ambivalent position is also evident in its relationship with partners in the Global South. The EU has the potential to act as a stabilising force offering fairer cooperation than the great powers striving for dominance. However, its ability to genuinely compete with initiatives such as China's Belt and Road Initiative remains limited [69]. The "Global Gateway" programme, intended as the European response, has not yet delivered the expected effect or scale [70].

The future of the EU as an actor in shaping the new global architecture, therefore, hinges on its ability to resolve internal contradictions and consolidate its resources. This requires not only greater unity in foreign policy but also bolder steps in economic and technological integration. Only then can the Union transform its values-based strength into real geopolitical influence and avoid the risk of becoming a passive object of great power rivalry. The EU thus stands before a historic challenge: it must either become a co-creator of the new global order or remain in a position where its significance is conditioned by the decisions of others. A broad spectrum of possibilities exists between autonomy and dependence, but only a clear strategy and concrete steps can ensure that Europe becomes a truly relevant and respected actor in the multipolar world.

5. Conclusions

The European Union stands at a historic juncture in the middle of the third decade of the third millennium, one that will fundamentally influence its future standing in the international system. The war in Ukraine, the global rivalry

between the United States and China, the fragmentation of the multilateral order, and rapid technological development have created an environment in which strategic autonomy has become the key concept of European policy. This paper has demonstrated that autonomy is not just a matter of defence and security, but primarily concerns the politics, economics, technologies, and the EU's capacity to act in unison.

In the first chapter, we indicated that the war in Ukraine acted as a catalyst for the European debate on strategic autonomy. It highlighted the limits of reliance on the United States and NATO while simultaneously exposing the EU's internal fragmentation, which undermines its capacity to act as a unified political actor. Strategic autonomy thus remains an ambitious political project whose realisation is associated with a multitude of internal disputes and compromises. In the second chapter, we analysed the economic and technological pillars of autonomy. It became evident that without strengthening the resilience of supply chains, diversifying energy sources, and investing in research, development, and innovation, the EU will remain reliant on external actors. A comparison with the US and China pointed to a lagging performance in terms of research expenditure and the capacity to translate scientific potential into practical applications. Digital and technological sovereignty, from Artificial Intelligence and cybersecurity to space capabilities, was shown to be an indispensable prerequisite for independent political decision-making. Simultaneously, however, the fiscal constraints of the Member States and uneven capacities pose the threat that the EU will remain trapped in a vicious circle of ambition without sufficient resources. In the third chapter, we focused on global challenges and partnerships. The multipolar world brings new power dynamics, contestation dynamics on the territorial, normative, and issue-specific levels, and pressure to redefine the EU's position. While the Union strives to act as a normative power offering multilateral solutions, its ability to influence global processes is constrained by persistent reliance and fragmentation. The future of the EU as a global actor will hinge on its capacity to transform values-based strength into concrete political, economic, and technological capabilities.

The key challenges in building the EU's strategic autonomy include reducing dependencies on external actors, consolidating internal political differences, and mobilising sufficient financial resources to support innovation and technological development. Autonomy is only partially attainable: in economics and technology, the EU can achieve significant progress if it strengthens integration and joint investments, but in the area of defence, its reliance on the US will remain unresolved for the long term. The war in Ukraine is redefining the demands for strategic autonomy by clearly showing its existential significance: it is not a luxury project but a condition for survival and the preservation of political sovereignty.

The normative implications of this research are unambiguous. If the EU is to remain a relevant actor in the multipolar world, it must find a balance between integration and respecting the diversity of its Member States. It must deepen its economic and technological integration, enhance its collective crisis response capability, and simultaneously retain its values-based anchoring. Strategic autonomy is not synonymous with isolation. On the contrary, it is a prerequisite for responsible partnerships in which the EU will be an equal, not weaker, player. The future perspectives for the EU are ambivalent but not without hope. If it can consolidate its resources and translate its economic and technological potential into real political power, it can become one of the pillars of the new global architecture. If, however, it remains divided and underinvested, it risks its role being reduced to that of a peripheral actor dependent on the decisions of other powers. The choice between these two paths will shape the European Union for the coming decades.

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