

**Exclusive  
Report**

# STRATEGIC AUTONOMY OR TRANSATLANTIC DEPENDENCY?

The EU's Evolving Role in  
Global Security



**Published By:**



# Table of Content

<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Historical Background</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>Conceptual Framework</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>The EU’s Security and Defense Strategies</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>Drivers of Change in the EU’s Security Role</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>1. Global Power Shifts and the US-China Rivalry</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>2. Effects of the Trump Administration on EU-US Relations</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>3. Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Economic-Security Interlinkages</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>4. Technological Disruptions and Security Challenges</b> .....	<b>16</b>
<b>5. Institutional Responses and Strategic Initiatives</b> .....	<b>16</b>
<b>6. Shifting Security Paradigms</b> .....	<b>16</b>
<b>Dimensions of Strategic Autonomy</b> .....	<b>18</b>
<b>1. Protective Autonomy: Defense Industrial Capabilities and Supply Chains</b> .....	<b>18</b>
<b>2. Autonomous Military Capabilities and Operational Readiness</b> .....	<b>19</b>
<b>3. Diplomatic and Multilateral Influence Projection</b> .....	<b>20</b>
<b>Integrative Overview and Interconnections</b> .....	<b>20</b>
<b>Transatlantic Relations in Flux</b> .....	<b>22</b>
<b>The Changing Role of the United States in European Security</b> .....	<b>22</b>
<b>EU-NATO Relations: Cooperation Amidst Challenges</b> .....	<b>22</b>
<b>Diverging Perspectives on Strategic Autonomy Within the Alliance</b> .....	<b>23</b>
<b>Case Studies</b> .....	<b>26</b>
<b>Case Study 1: EU Responses to the Ukraine Conflict</b> .....	<b>26</b>
Financial and Military Support.....	26
Legal and Accountability Measures.....	26
Institutional and Political Solidarity.....	27
<b>Case Study 2: EU-US Security Cooperation in the Ukraine Crisis</b> .....	<b>27</b>
Closely Coordinated Military and Economic Assistance.....	27
Tensions and Divergence in Transatlantic Relations.....	27
<b>Case Study 3: The Influence of Strategic Autonomy Debates on EU Foreign Policy</b> ...	<b>28</b>
Strengthening Strategic Autonomy.....	28
Balancing Autonomy with Alliance.....	28
Impact on EU Foreign Policy Orientation.....	28
Summary.....	29
<b>Challenges and Constraints</b> .....	<b>30</b>
<b>1. Political Challenges</b> .....	<b>30</b>
Divergent National Interests and Strategic Cultures.....	30
Reluctance to Pool Sovereignty on Sensitive Security Issues.....	30

Political Will and Cohesion Under Stress.....	30
<b>2. Institutional Challenges.....</b>	<b>31</b>
Complex and Slow Decision-Making Processes.....	31
Fragmentation of Defense Initiatives.....	31
Limited Supranational Authority in Security and Defense.....	31
<b>3. Member State Divergences.....</b>	<b>31</b>
Varied Defense Spending and Capability Gaps.....	31
Different Strategic Priorities and External Orientations.....	32
National Industrial and Technological Fragmentation.....	32
<b>4. Technological Dependencies.....</b>	<b>32</b>
Lagging Behind in Critical Technologies.....	32
Supply Chain Vulnerabilities and Overreliance on External Providers.....	32
Industrial Investment Gaps and Innovation Challenges.....	32
<b>Summary Overview Table.....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Recent Policy Initiatives Addressing Challenges.....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Policy Implications and Future Outlook.....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Policy Implications of the Current EU Security Trajectory.....</b>	<b>35</b>
Policy implications include:.....	35
• Increased Defense Spending and Integration:.....	35
• Enhanced Internal and External Security Linkages:.....	35
• Strategic Autonomy as a Framework and Challenge:.....	35
<b>Possible Pathways for Strengthening Strategic Autonomy.....</b>	<b>36</b>
1. Accelerating Defense Industrial and Technological Sovereignty:.....	36
2. Enhancing Operational Military Capabilities and Rapid Deployment Capacity:.....	36
3. Institutional and Governance Reforms:.....	36
4. Strengthening the Linkages between Internal and External Security:.....	37
<b>Enhancing EU-US Partnerships.....</b>	<b>37</b>
• Burden-Sharing and Complementarity:.....	37
• Deepening Cooperation on Emerging Threats:.....	37
• Managing Divergences and Building Trust:.....	37
• Promoting Multilateralism and Global Governance:.....	37
<b>Potential Future Scenarios for the EU's Global Security Role.....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Appendices.....</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>1. Key EU Policy Documents and Initiatives:.....</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>2. Glossary of Relevant Terms:.....</b>	<b>44</b>

## Executive Summary

The European Union's role in global security has undergone a profound evolution in the face of shifting geopolitical landscapes, emerging threats, and changing transatlantic dynamics. Once primarily an economic and regulatory entity focused on integration and internal development, the EU has increasingly sought to assert itself as a significant security actor on the global stage. This transformation is especially predicated on the tension between two central and often conflicting imperatives: the pursuit of strategic autonomy and the enduring dependency on transatlantic alliances, chiefly with the United States through NATO. This report explores this evolving role of the European Union in global security, comprehensively analyzing the interplay of strategic autonomy ambitions alongside transatlantic security commitments, offering insights into the implications for Europe's position in the international order.

The relevance of this study lies in the critical juncture at which the EU finds itself amid unprecedented global challenges. The resurgence of great power competition, exemplified by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, escalating tensions in the Indo-Pacific, and the complex multi-domain nature of contemporary security threats—including cyber warfare, hybrid threats, terrorism, and state and non-state conflicts—have dramatically underscored the need for a coherent, capable, and unified European security policy. At the same time, the uncertainty around the reliability of the US as a security guarantor, punctuated by recent political shifts in Washington, has ignited debates within Europe about the necessity and extent of strategic autonomy in defense and security matters. This evolving security environment urges the EU to re-examine its capabilities, alliances, and strategic coherence to safeguard European interests and uphold the rules-based international order.[+3](#)

The concept of strategic autonomy embodies the EU's ambition to develop independent military, technological, and operational capabilities that allow it to act decisively without excessive reliance on external powers, particularly the US. It reflects a desire for Europe to manage its security challenges more independently while still maintaining a cooperative relationship with NATO. Nevertheless, member states exhibit varied degrees of enthusiasm about strategic autonomy, mindful of the risks of duplicating NATO structures and complicating transatlantic relations. The debate goes beyond mere military capabilities; it touches on industrial policy, defence technological independence, and the political will to speak with one voice on security matters. Strategic autonomy does not imply abandoning NATO but rather seeks to complement and enhance the transatlantic partnership by strengthening Europe's ability to share the security burden effectively.[+2](#)

This report aims to:

- Provide an in-depth contextual analysis of the EU's evolving role as a global security actor;

- Examine the tensions and overlap between strategic autonomy and transatlantic dependency;
- Evaluate the internal and external challenges that shape EU security policy and cooperation frameworks;
- Assess the implications of the EU's security posture on global peace, stability, and defense partnerships;
- Identify prospective directions for EU security and defense integration in the coming decade.

The scope of the report includes a detailed investigation of the EU's security and defense initiatives, such as the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), recent European Defence Union proposals, and the emerging European Internal Security Strategy aiming to address hybrid and cyber threats. Special attention is given to geopolitical developments affecting the EU's security outlook, including the war in Ukraine, increasing competition with China, and the evolving nature of the NATO alliance after recent US administrations. The report will consider EU member state perspectives, institutional dynamics, and the interplay with other global actors to outline a comprehensive picture of the European security architecture's present and future trajectory.<sup>+4</sup>

Key questions explored in the report include:

- How has the EU's security and defense role transformed over the past two decades, and what factors have driven this change?
- What are the principal elements defining European strategic autonomy, and how do member states and institutional actors conceptualize and operationalize it?
- To what extent does reliance on the US-led NATO framework restrict or enable the EU's ambitions for autonomous security capabilities?
- How do recent geopolitical crises, including Russia's aggression in Ukraine, inform the EU's strategic priorities and its relationship with transatlantic partners?
- What are the main internal challenges (political, economic, social) that the EU faces in forging a unified approach to security and defense?

- In what ways can the EU balance its quest for greater autonomy with the necessity of a robust transatlantic partnership for global security?

By addressing these questions, the report seeks to illuminate the strategic choices confronting the European Union and to contribute to scholarly and policy debates on the future of European and global security governance. Ultimately, understanding the dynamics between strategic autonomy and transatlantic dependency is crucial for grasping the EU's capacity to navigate complex security challenges and uphold its values and interests in an increasingly multipolar and turbulent international system.<sup>+3</sup>

This introduction thus sets the framework for a comprehensive examination of the EU's evolving security role, emphasizing the intricate balance between autonomy and alliance that will continue to define European security policy in the years ahead.

1. [https://www.cer.eu/sites/default/files/pbrief\\_strategic\\_autonomy\\_11.12.20.pdf](https://www.cer.eu/sites/default/files/pbrief_strategic_autonomy_11.12.20.pdf)
2. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/european-journal-of-international-security/article/eus-evolving-leadership-role-in-an-age-of-geopolitics-beyond-normative-and-market-power-in-the-indopacific/B10DC74C8339DFBB2CD155E9851D6969>
3. <https://europeanmovement.eu/policy-focus/commission-work-programme-2025/>
4. <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/commentary/global-risks-eu-blueprint-navigate-year-ahead>
5. <https://www.unav.edu/en/web/global-affairs/the-shift-of-the-transatlantic-link-on-defense-from-dependency-to-autonomy>
6. [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/why-european-strategic-autonomy-matters\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/why-european-strategic-autonomy-matters_en)
7. <https://www.eiag.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/the-eus-role-in-european-security.pdf>
8. [https://commission.europa.eu/news-and-media/news/commission-presents-european-internal-security-strategy-2025-04-01\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/news-and-media/news/commission-presents-european-internal-security-strategy-2025-04-01_en)
9. [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/stronger-eu-security-and-defence\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/stronger-eu-security-and-defence_en)
10. [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-peace-security-and-defence\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-peace-security-and-defence_en)
11. <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/news/2024/12/europes-evolving-role-in-global-security>
12. <https://mepei.com/picking-the-fights-eu-security-challenges-and-threats-as-of-13-april-2025/>
13. <https://ecfr.eu/article/quick-off-the-bloc-security-challenges-for-the-next-european-commission/>
14. [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-presents-protecteu-internal-security-strategy-2025-04-01\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-presents-protecteu-internal-security-strategy-2025-04-01_en)
15. <https://www.europeanpapers.eu/en/europeanforum/strategic-autonomy-new-identity-eu-global-actor>

16. [https://institutdelors.eu/content/uploads/2025/06/PB\\_250408\\_Politique\\_europeenne\\_sec\\_urite\\_interieur\\_Mafart\\_EN.pdf](https://institutdelors.eu/content/uploads/2025/06/PB_250408_Politique_europeenne_sec_urite_interieur_Mafart_EN.pdf)
17. [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/127292/1/European\\_strategic\\_autonomy\\_in\\_the\\_transatlantic\\_security\\_context\\_American\\_perceptions\\_of\\_European\\_security\\_and\\_defence\\_integration\\_1998\\_2022\\_1\\_.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/127292/1/European_strategic_autonomy_in_the_transatlantic_security_context_American_perceptions_of_European_security_and_defence_integration_1998_2022_1_.pdf)
18. <https://www.global-counsel.com/insights/report/re-arming-europe-strengthening-eu-uk-defence-co-operation>
19. <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/strengthening-europes-capacity-to-act-in-foreign-and-security-policy>
20. [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/125667/1/Pages\\_from\\_challenges\\_of\\_the\\_common\\_security\\_and\\_defence\\_policy-QWAD21001ENN\\_2\\_.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/125667/1/Pages_from_challenges_of_the_common_security_and_defence_policy-QWAD21001ENN_2_.pdf)

## Historical Background

The European Union's security and defense policy has evolved through multiple phases shaped by historical context, institutional innovation, and its relationship with transatlantic allies, principally NATO and the United States.

The origins trace back to the post-World War II period with early efforts for European defense integration to protect against Soviet and German threats. The 1948 Treaty of Brussels established the Western Union for collective defense among the UK, France, and the Benelux countries, laying the groundwork for the Western European Union (WEU) formed in 1954. However, early initiatives like the proposed European Defence Community failed, partly due to the dominance of NATO and internal disagreements.[+2](#)

During the Cold War, NATO became the primary security guarantor for Western Europe, and the WEU remained largely dormant for many years. In 1970, the European Political Cooperation (EPC) was established to encourage coordination among European Communities on foreign policy matters, marking one of the earliest steps toward political cooperation on security issues.

The 1990s brought renewed momentum for a European security identity. The Treaty of Maastricht (1992) created the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) pillar within the newly formed EU, formalizing the collective foreign policy approach among member states. The WEU was reactivated in 1984 and given new tasks, and in 1996 NATO agreed to develop a European Security and Defence Identity (ESDI) within its framework, supporting a European contribution to collective defense.[+2](#)

A critical milestone came with the Franco-British St. Malo declaration in December 1998, where the UK, for the first time, endorsed the development of autonomous European defense capabilities. This declaration acknowledged that the EU must have the capacity for autonomous action backed by credible military forces, signaling a shift toward EU-led defense initiatives while maintaining cooperation with NATO.[+1](#)

In 1999, the ESDI transformed into the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), transferring responsibilities from the WEU to the EU. The Helsinki European Council in December 1999 set the headline goal for EU security: the ability to deploy a rapid reaction force of up to 60,000 troops within 60 days to conduct a full range of Petersberg tasks (humanitarian missions, peacekeeping, and crisis management). This period also saw the institution of new committees to run the policy, including the Political and Security Committee and the EU Military Committee.[+2](#)

The EU launched its first CSDP missions in 2003, while the European Security Strategy (ESS) adopted the same year identified common threats and objectives, marking a turning point in conceptualizing a unified EU approach to security challenges worldwide.[+1](#)

The Treaty of Lisbon (2009) renamed the ESDP as the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and introduced key institutional reforms such as the creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS), a mutual defense clause (Article 42.7), and provisions for Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) allowing a subset of member states to deepen defense collaboration.<sup>+2</sup>

Following the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 and other geopolitical shifts, the EU initiated a new Global Strategy in 2016 under High Representative Federica Mogherini, which gave new impetus to the CSDP. This strategy led to several initiatives: the European Defence Fund (EDF) to finance defense projects, the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) to align national military spending, and the establishment of the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC), the first permanent EU military headquarters.<sup>+3</sup>

Tensions between transatlantic relations and EU autonomy have been a defining feature throughout. US policymakers initially expressed concerns about duplication and fragmentation but eventually supported a more capable European partner contributing to NATO’s collective security. The three "D"s—avoid de-linking from NATO, duplicating efforts, or discriminating against non-EU NATO members—formed a framework for balancing EU initiatives within the transatlantic alliance.

In recent years, the EU’s security role has deepened, exemplified by its €500 million arms aid to Ukraine in response to Russia’s 2022 invasion—the first time the EU financed weapons deliveries to an active conflict zone. Concurrently, Denmark’s 2022 referendum to end its defense opt-out from EU policies signaled further integration willingness among member states.

Key milestones summarized:

<b>Year</b>	<b>Milestone</b>	<b>Significance</b>
1948	Treaty of Brussels (Western Union)	Early European collective defense
1954	Western European Union (WEU)	Successor to Western Union; defense cooperation
1992	Treaty of Maastricht: CFSP created	Formal EU foreign and security policy
1996	NATO approves ESDI	European Security and Defence Identity within NATO
1998	St. Malo Declaration	UK supports EU autonomous defense capacity

1999	Creation of ESDP	EU assumes defense role from WEU
1999	Helsinki Council sets headline goal	EU rapid reaction force capability
2003	EU deploys first CSDP missions; ESS adopted	Operationalization of EU security role
2009	Treaty of Lisbon reforms, CSDP renaming	Institutional strengthening, mutual defense clause
2016	EU Global Strategy launched	New strategic impetus, institutional initiatives
2017–present	PESCO, EDF, CARD, MPCC	Enhanced integration and operational capacity
2022	EU military assistance to Ukraine	First EU arms financing in active conflict

This historical overview highlights the EU's journey from fragmented defense efforts to an increasingly coherent security actor balancing strategic autonomy with transatlantic alliance commitments. [+3](#)

1. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common\\_Security\\_and\\_Defence\\_Policy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_Security_and_Defence_Policy)
2. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_the\\_Common\\_Security\\_and\\_Defence\\_Policy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Common_Security_and_Defence_Policy)
3. <https://www.lse.ac.uk/international-relations/assets/documents/efpu/CFSP-Chronology-Institutions-updated2019.pdf>
4. <https://eda.europa.eu/our-history/our-history.html>
5. <https://www.europeaninstitute.org/~european/index.php/82-facts/eu-facts/897-european-defence-timeline>
6. [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/shaping-common-security-and-defence-policy\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/shaping-common-security-and-defence-policy_en)
7. <https://verfassungsblog.de/historical-development-lessons-for-the-future%EF%BB%BF/>
8. <https://www.innertemplelibrary.org.uk/timeline/a-history-of-the-eu/>
9. <https://ue.delegfrance.org/IMG/0601%20Brief%20guide%20to%20ESDP.pdf>
10. <https://epthinktank.eu/2021/09/30/who-does-what-in-security-and-defence/>

## Conceptual Framework

**Strategic Autonomy** in the European Union (EU) context refers to the capacity of the EU to act independently and decisively in security, defense, economic, and other strategically important policy domains without being overly reliant on external actors, notably the United States and NATO. It means having the political unity, institutional capability, military and technological means, and an industrial defense base sufficient to uphold and implement EU interests in a coherent manner. This concept emphasizes not complete isolation but *chosen interdependence*, whereby the EU can engage with partners on equal footing, maintaining sovereignty over its decisions and the ability to shield itself from external coercion.<sup>+2</sup>

The origins of strategic autonomy trace to defense contexts, especially military autonomy, where the EU aspires to have credible and sustainable defense forces capable of rapid reaction and crisis management independently or alongside partners. Over time, the concept has broadened to encompass economic resilience, technological sovereignty, and the safeguarding of democratic values and foreign policy objectives. The 2016 EU Global Strategy formally embedded strategic autonomy as an objective framing EU foreign and security policy, highlighting it as essential for peace, security, and the EU's global role.<sup>+2</sup>

The political and institutional challenge inherent in strategic autonomy lies in overcoming the reluctance of member states to pool sovereignty fully in sensitive security areas. Achieving autonomy requires accelerating decision-making mechanisms and stronger unity, especially in crisis situations where slow, fragmented responses weaken EU credibility. Simultaneously, capabilities and innovation in defense technologies and industries must be enhanced to reduce external dependencies and strengthen operational effectiveness.<sup>+1</sup>

In contrast, **Transatlantic Dependency** refers to the EU's historical and ongoing reliance on the US-led NATO alliance for its primary security guarantees, particularly in deterrence and defense. Most EU member states depend on NATO's collective defense framework, and the United States remains the central military power ensuring European security, notably through nuclear deterrence. This dependency shapes EU defense policy as member states weigh the benefits of strategic autonomy against the security provided by reinforced transatlantic ties. EU commitments affirm NATO's primacy in territorial defense (Article 42.7 TEU), reflecting persistent strategic dependency.

This duality—aspiring for autonomy while relying on transatlantic ties—creates tension. Some EU countries, particularly in Eastern Europe, caution against duplicating NATO efforts or diluting US commitment by developing separate EU defense structures. The US has consistently promoted a “three D’s” policy: EU efforts on autonomy must avoid *de-linking* from NATO, *duplicating* efforts, or *discriminating* against non-EU NATO allies.

Theoretical frameworks provide lenses through which to understand this balance:

- **Neofunctionalism** views the EU's pursuit of strategic autonomy as part of a gradual process of integration driven by functional spillovers. Cooperation in defense and security leads to increasing pooling of sovereignty as member states recognize the benefits of joint action and capability development. This theory predicts incremental erosion of national control over security matters as supranational institutions gain influence, fostering a deeper, autonomous European security identity. The complex challenges of security crises further incentivize integration as collective responses become more effective and necessary.
- **Intergovernmentalism**, by contrast, asserts that security and defense integration remain fundamentally controlled by national governments, who prioritize their sovereignty and strategic interests. According to this perspective, the EU's capacity for strategic autonomy is limited by the need for consensus and the divergent threat perceptions and preferences among member states. Transatlantic dependency is viewed as a rational and deliberate decision by states to rely on NATO and the US's military capabilities due to cost, strategic culture, and security guarantees. The pace and depth of autonomy reflect bargaining among governments rather than inevitable institutional spillover.<sup>+1</sup>

Thus, while neofunctionalism offers a hopeful outlook on the evolution toward a more autonomous EU security actor through deeper integration over time, intergovernmentalism highlights the persistent limits imposed by state sovereignty concerns and the pragmatic necessity of transatlantic ties.

In conclusion, **Strategic Autonomy** in the EU aims at a credible, unified capacity to act independently in security and broader strategic fields, while **Transatlantic Dependency** denotes the foundation of the EU's security on NATO and US military power. These dynamics coexist amid complex institutional arrangements and political preferences. Theoretical frameworks of neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism help explain how the ambition for autonomy unfolds—whether as a stepwise integration process or a constrained intergovernmental bargain influenced by member states' national interests and reliance on transatlantic security guarantees.

1. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS\\_BRI\(2022\)733589](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2022)733589)
2. [https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/Report\\_European\\_Strategic\\_Autonomy\\_December\\_2020.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/Report_European_Strategic_Autonomy_December_2020.pdf)
3. <https://www.europeanpapers.eu/en/europeanforum/strategic-autonomy-new-identity-eu-global-actor>
4. [https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/strategy/strategy-research-and-innovation/europe-world/international-cooperation/strategic-autonomy-and-european-economic-and-research-security\\_en](https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/strategy/strategy-research-and-innovation/europe-world/international-cooperation/strategic-autonomy-and-european-economic-and-research-security_en)

5. <https://www.lse.ac.uk/business/consulting/reports/smes-and-open-strategic-autonomy>
6. <https://cejiss.org/half-hearted-or-pragmatic-explaining-eu-strategic-autonomy-and-the-european-defence-fund-through-institutional-dynamics>
7. <https://www.diis.dk/en/research/european-strategic-autonomy-from-misconceived-to-useful-concept>
8. <https://www.europeanpapers.eu/en/europeanforum/legal-framework-eu-defence-industry-and-pursuit-strategic-autonomy>
9. <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/620-european-sovereignty-strategic-autonomy-europe-as-a-power-what-reality-for-the-european-union-and-for-what-future>

## The EU's Security and Defense Strategies

The European Union's main security and defense strategies include the **European Security Strategy (ESS, 2003)**, the **European Union Global Strategy (EUGS, 2016)**, and the **Strategic Compass (2022)**.

- The **ESS** was the EU's first comprehensive framework to identify common security threats such as terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, regional conflicts, and state failure. It emphasized multilateralism, conflict prevention, crisis management, and building partnerships to promote peace and stability globally.
- The **EUGS** updated the approach with a stronger focus on **strategic autonomy**, aimed at enhancing Europe's capacity to act independently alongside partners. It prioritized resilience building, cooperative security, and linking internal and external security challenges, stressing stronger military cooperation, intelligence sharing, and investment in defense capabilities to reduce overreliance on the US.
- The **Strategic Compass**, adopted in 2022, provides an operational roadmap to sharpen and implement EU security and defense ambitions over the next 5 to 10 years. It sets clearer priorities on capability development, crisis management, rapid deployment capacities (including the creation of an EU Rapid Deployment Capacity of up to 5,000 troops), and stronger partnerships with NATO and other like-minded countries. It also focuses on emerging threats in cyber, hybrid warfare, space, and maritime security domains.<sup>[1](#)</sup>

Among institutional frameworks, the **Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP)** forms the EU's core mechanism for defense and crisis management. Established under the Treaty of Lisbon (2009), the CSDP orchestrates both civilian and military missions worldwide—focused on peacekeeping, conflict prevention, and capacity building. It includes bodies such as the Political and Security Committee, the EU Military Staff, and the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC), which operates as the EU's military headquarters for non-executive missions. The CSDP is led by the High Representative and generally requires unanimous decisions by the Foreign Affairs Council.

**Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)**, launched in 2017, is a framework allowing EU member states that choose to participate (currently 26 out of 27 states) to deepen defense cooperation through joint development and investment in defense capabilities, interoperability, and operational readiness. Projects under PESCO cover domains including cyber defense, maritime, air defense, and rapid reaction forces. PESCO aims to strengthen the European defense technological and industrial base, aligning with the EU's strategic autonomy goals.<sup>[1](#)</sup>

The **European Defence Fund (EDF)**, operational since 2021 with a planned budget to support research, capability development, and innovation in defense technologies across the EU, complements PESCO by financing multinational projects. It seeks to promote EU-wide defense industrial competitiveness, reduce duplication, and foster technological sovereignty in critical areas such as cyber, aerospace, and next-generation capabilities. The EDF coordinates closely with initiatives like PESCO to ensure strategic investments meet capability gaps.<sup>+1</sup>

Together, these strategies and institutional frameworks guide the EU's security posture by enhancing operational capacity, accelerating decision-making, and fostering technological and industrial development, while maintaining strong cooperation with NATO and other partners to ensure comprehensive security across multiple threat domains.

1. [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-1\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-1_en)
2. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common\\_Security\\_and\\_Defence\\_Policy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_Security_and_Defence_Policy)
3. <https://www.bruegel.org/policy-brief/european-defence-industrial-strategy-hostile-world>
4. [https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/Report\\_The\\_EUs\\_Compas\\_for\\_security\\_and\\_defence\\_May\\_2021.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/Report_The_EUs_Compas_for_security_and_defence_May_2021.pdf)
5. [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/stronger-eu-security-and-defence\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/stronger-eu-security-and-defence_en)
6. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/03/the-eu-common-security-and-defense-policy-moving-away-from-democracy-support?lang=en>
7. <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/the-new-eu-uk-security-and-defence-partnership/>
8. <https://epthinktank.eu/2021/09/30/who-does-what-in-security-and-defence/>
9. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/defending-europe-with-less-america/>

## Drivers of Change in the EU's Security Role

The European Union's evolving security role is driven by a complex set of geopolitical, institutional, economic, and technological factors that collectively reshape its approach and ambitions in global security cooperation.

### 1. Global Power Shifts and the US-China Rivalry

The intensified strategic competition between the United States and China profoundly influences the EU's security calculus. As China's global influence expands economically, technologically, and militarily, the EU faces a multipolar world where previous US hegemony is contested. This US-China rivalry places the EU in a delicate position, compelling it to balance economic interdependence with China against long-standing security ties with the US and NATO. It fuels EU efforts toward *strategic autonomy*—developing the capacity to act independently in security matters without excessive reliance on any external power. The EU recognizes that its security interests cannot be fully safeguarded by transatlantic dependency alone amid a shifting global order marked by emerging challenges in the Indo-Pacific and growing assertiveness by China.<sup>[1](#)</sup>

### 2. Effects of the Trump Administration on EU-US Relations

The Trump administration's tenure revealed significant volatility in transatlantic relations, impacting the EU's security outlook. President Trump openly questioned the US commitment to NATO's collective defense, demanding increased European defense spending and signaling a readiness to reconsider Washington's security guarantees. This approach undermined European confidence in US reliability, accelerating discussions within the EU about bolstering autonomous defense capabilities. The rhetoric of "burden-shifting" and transactional diplomacy exposed the vulnerabilities of the transatlantic alliance and motivated the EU to take a more proactive posture in security cooperation and capability development. Diplomatic tensions extended beyond security into trade disputes, complicating the broader strategic partnership.<sup>[2](#)</sup>

### 3. Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Economic-Security Interlinkages

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the intrinsic link between economic resilience and security, revealing Europe's vulnerabilities in critical supply chains, medical supplies, and technological dependencies. Recognition of these weaknesses elevated the priority of

economic security within the EU's broader strategic framework. The pandemic propelled initiatives to ensure supply chain diversification, reduce reliance on external suppliers for essential technologies and materials, and enhance internal preparedness. This holistic view strengthened calls for strategic autonomy not only in defense but also in critical industrial and technological sectors, contributing to a shift from reactive to proactive security policies. The pandemic accelerated EU institutional developments emphasizing crisis preparedness and internal security governance as articulated in new strategies like ProtectEU.<sup>+1</sup>

#### 4. Technological Disruptions and Security Challenges

Emerging technologies, including cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, digital surveillance, and space-based assets, fundamentally alter the security environment. The EU faces evolving threats such as cyber attacks, hybrid warfare, misinformation campaigns, and dependence on non-European technology suppliers. These pressures drive European investment in defense research and development through mechanisms like the European Defence Fund (EDF) and encourage deeper technological cooperation via frameworks such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). The EU aims to reduce vulnerabilities stemming from technological dependencies while harnessing innovation to upgrade its military and intelligence capacities. Technological disruption also reinforces the need for integration of civilian and military security efforts and intensifies the focus on collective situational awareness and intelligence sharing.<sup>+2</sup>

#### 5. Institutional Responses and Strategic Initiatives

In response to these drivers, the EU is moving toward enhanced defense integration and strategic coordination. Key institutional initiatives include the ongoing development of the European Defence Union, increased defense spending commitments, and the strategic framing of security policies through new strategic documents such as the European Internal Security Strategy (ProtectEU). The EU has also created novel institutional bodies and special groups to coordinate defense spending, capability development, and crisis response on a collective basis. These efforts reflect a trend toward a more unified European security apparatus capable of addressing complex and multi-domain threats while maintaining strong—but recalibrated—relations with NATO and global partners.<sup>+2</sup>

#### 6. Shifting Security Paradigms

The cumulative effect of these factors is a shifting European security paradigm. Whereas the EU traditionally relied heavily on the US-led NATO framework, recent geopolitical

and technological challenges have catalyzed a multifaceted approach emphasizing resilience, autonomy, and enhanced cooperation within the EU and with external partners. The evolving strategic environment encourages the EU to pursue a *chosen interdependence*—balancing autonomous capabilities with transatlantic ties to manage security contingencies more effectively and lessen vulnerabilities.<sup>+1</sup>

It highlights that the EU's evolving security role is propelled by global geopolitical shifts, uncertainties in transatlantic relations especially under the Trump administration, lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic on economic and security interdependence, and rapid technological breakthroughs reshaping threat landscapes and defense capabilities. These drivers converge to push the EU toward enhanced strategic autonomy, more integrated institutional frameworks, and a proactive security posture aimed at safeguarding European interests in an increasingly complex global order.

1. <https://europeanmovement.eu/policy-focus/commission-work-programme-2025/>
2. [https://commission.europa.eu/news-and-media/news/commission-presents-european-international-security-strategy-2025-04-01\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/news-and-media/news/commission-presents-european-international-security-strategy-2025-04-01_en)
3. <https://eucrim.eu/news/commission-new-eu-security-union-strategy/>
4. [https://www.eumonitor.eu/9353000/1/j4nvhdjdk3hydza\\_j9vvik7m1c3gyxp/vmm7rfrp77ux](https://www.eumonitor.eu/9353000/1/j4nvhdjdk3hydza_j9vvik7m1c3gyxp/vmm7rfrp77ux)
5. [https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/creation-security-action-europe-special-group-2025-07-16\\_en](https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/creation-security-action-europe-special-group-2025-07-16_en)
6. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-eu-security-and-defence-partnership/security-and-defence-partnership-between-the-european-union-and-the-united-kingdom-of-great-britain-and-northern-ireland>
7. <https://www.digital-operational-resilience-act.com>
8. <https://www.socialeurope.eu/a-changing-europe-strategic-autonomy-and-security-in-2025-and-beyond>
9. <https://www.nis-2-directive.com>
10. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOGOt9EzwnM>

## Dimensions of Strategic Autonomy

The European Union's **strategic autonomy** constitutes a multifaceted concept encompassing several critical dimensions that collectively enable the EU to act independently and effectively in security and defense matters while safeguarding its broader strategic interests. These dimensions broadly include **protective autonomy**, **autonomous military capabilities and operational readiness**, and **diplomatic and multilateral influence projection**, which together form the foundation of the EU's ability to function as a global security actor without excessive reliance on external powers, particularly the United States and NATO.

### 1. Protective Autonomy: Defense Industrial Capabilities and Supply Chains

**Protective autonomy** refers primarily to the EU's capacity to secure its defense industrial base, critical technologies, and supply chains against external dependencies and vulnerabilities that could undermine its strategic actions. This dimension involves building a robust, innovative, and competitive European defense industry capable of producing advanced military technologies, equipment, and dual-use goods independently or with minimal external input.

- The EU's defense industrial and technological base is central to protective autonomy. Ensuring long-term availability of critical capabilities requires investment in research, development, and production within Europe, supported by initiatives like the **European Defence Fund (EDF)**, which finances collaborative projects to foster innovation and reduce duplication among member states.[+1](#)
- Strategic autonomy in this dimension also means securing supply chains for crucial materials, components, and technologies, including sensitive dual-use items (those with both civilian and military applications) such as artificial intelligence, robotics, aerospace technologies, and critical raw materials. The COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical tensions highlighted EU vulnerabilities in global supply chains, prompting efforts to diversify sources, increase stockpiles, and develop internal production capacities.[+1](#)
- At the policy level, the EU uses regulations to screen foreign investments and protect critical infrastructures, such as energy, communications, and defense-related industries, against hostile takeovers or dependencies that threaten security and public order. This regulatory safeguarding is a practical implementation of protective autonomy.
- The **defense technological and industrial dimension** also entails ensuring interoperability among member states' defense equipment and systems to enable cohesive operational capabilities, avoiding fragmentation that could dilute the EU's collective military potential.[europeanpapers+1](#)

Protective autonomy thus represents the industrial and economic foundation that enables the EU to sustain independent defense action and reduce external coercion risks embedded in technological and supply dependencies.

## 2. Autonomous Military Capabilities and Operational Readiness

The second core dimension is centered on the EU's **military capabilities** and its ability to plan, deploy, and conduct operations independently or in cooperation with partners as needed. This includes the development, acquisition, and maintenance of defense forces, rapid deployment units, command-and-control structures, and logistical capacity.

- Autonomous military capabilities incorporate the ability to conduct the full range of security and defense missions, from crisis management and peacekeeping to high-intensity conflict scenarios. The EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) operationalizes these ambitions through missions and ongoing crisis management efforts.
- Within this framework, the establishment of the **Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC)** serves as a permanent operational headquarters for non-executive military missions, strengthening EU command autonomy in the execution of military tasks.
- **Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)** enables willing EU member states to collaborate on joint defense capability development, enhancing interoperability, capability pooling, and burden-sharing, thereby expanding the EU's autonomous military potential. PESCO projects target priority areas such as cyber defense, maritime security, air defense, and rapid reaction forces.[+1](#)
- In terms of operational readiness, strategic autonomy demands a more integrated EU rapid reaction force capable of deployment within short timeframes to respond to crises. For instance, the Strategic Compass (2022) supports building an EU Rapid Deployment Capacity of up to 5,000 troops to demonstrate concrete progress in this area.
- Achieving autonomous military capabilities presupposes political unity and decision-making efficiency, which remain challenges due to divergent threat perceptions and national interests among member states. Without cohesive political will, capability development risks being slow and fragmented.

Autonomous military capabilities and operational readiness constitute the practical, deployable expression of strategic autonomy, allowing the EU not only to make independent decisions but also to follow through militarily without undue dependence on NATO or the US.

### 3. Diplomatic and Multilateral Influence Projection

The third dimension of strategic autonomy relates to the EU's **diplomatic capacity** and its ability to project influence multilaterally on the global stage, shaping international security environments and norms.

- Strategic autonomy aspires to grant the EU the diplomatic leverage to act decisively and coherently in foreign policy and security matters, including crisis diplomacy, conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and norm-setting in global governance.[+1](#)
- The EU's **Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP)**, supported by the European External Action Service (EEAS) and its High Representative, forms the institutional backbone enabling coordinated diplomatic initiatives aligned with strategic autonomy goals.
- The EU aims to strengthen its role as a security actor not by isolating itself but by engaging actively in multilateral fora (UN, NATO partnerships, OSCE, etc.), exercising *chosen interdependence*—acting autonomously but collaboratively where beneficial.[+1](#)
- Diplomatic autonomy also requires the EU to develop capacities for intelligence sharing, strategic communication, and coordinated sanctions policies, providing tools to influence adversaries, protect its interests, and contribute to global security architecture.
- The broadening of strategic autonomy beyond hard security includes economic, technological, and normative dimensions, where the EU seeks to maintain autonomy in decision-making on trade, technology standards, and values promotion internationally, thus enhancing its global role and resilience.

### Integrative Overview and Interconnections

These three dimensions—**protective autonomy**, **autonomous military capabilities**, and **diplomatic influence**—are deeply interconnected. The EU's ability to act autonomously in diplomatic forums depends on having credible military capabilities and a secure industrial base. Likewise, military power and readiness require strong industrial backbone and political cohesion. The EU's strategic autonomy can only be achieved if progress is made simultaneously in these spheres, as shortcomings in one undermine the others.

In practice, advancing strategic autonomy is a complex, multi-level process involving policy coordination, institutional reforms, capability development, and alliance management. The EU continues to balance ambitions of autonomy with the pragmatic necessities of collaboration,

particularly with NATO and the United States, reflecting a nuanced approach rather than absolute independence.<sup>+1</sup>

1. [https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/Report\\_European\\_Strategic\\_Autonomy\\_December\\_2020.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/Report_European_Strategic_Autonomy_December_2020.pdf)
2. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733589/EPRS\\_BRI\(2022\)733589\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733589/EPRS_BRI(2022)733589_EN.pdf)
3. <https://www.europeanpapers.eu/en/europeanforum/strategic-autonomy-new-identity-eu-global-actor>
4. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strategic\\_autonomy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strategic_autonomy)
5. <https://www.europeanpapers.eu/en/europeanforum/eu-space-policy-and-strategic-autonomy>
6. <https://cejiss.org/half-hearted-or-pragmatic-explaining-eu-strategic-autonomy-and-the-european-defence-fund-through-institutional-dynamics>
7. <https://encompass-europe.com/comment/eu-strategic-autonomy-unpacking-the-essentially-contested-concept>
8. <https://www.diis.dk/en/research/european-strategic-autonomy-from-misconceived-to-useful-concept>

## Transatlantic Relations in Flux

The dynamics of transatlantic relations, particularly between the European Union (EU), NATO, and the United States, are undergoing significant shifts driven by changing strategic priorities, evolving geopolitical contexts, and divergent views on the future of European security. This analysis examines the changing role of the US in European security, the complexities and challenges within EU-NATO relations, and the differing perspectives on strategic autonomy within the alliance framework.

### The Changing Role of the United States in European Security

The United States has historically been the cornerstone of European security since World War II, predominantly through NATO. The US provided the primary military capabilities underpinning European defense, including nuclear deterrence, strategic airlift, advanced command-and-control systems, and enabling capabilities that European militaries often lack. However, recent years have seen a gradual recalibration of the US role, driven by shifting American strategic priorities.<sup>1</sup>

According to the 2025 US National Defence Policy Guidance, there is a marked shift toward prioritizing the Indo-Pacific region, recognizing China as the foremost strategic competitor. This change includes a planned drawdown of conventional US military assets and enablers in the Euro-Atlantic theater, signaling a reduction in the US military footprint in Europe. Secretary Hegseth (2025) explicitly stated that “strategic realities prevent the US from taking primary responsibility for European conventional deterrence,” signaling a policy that expects European allies to assume greater responsibility for their own security while the US reallocates resources.<sup>+2</sup>

This shifting posture introduces uncertainty regarding the sustainability of US commitments to European defense, prompting concerns that Washington might unilaterally reduce its presence or capabilities without sufficient consultation. The example of the US coercing Ukraine in early 2025 by withholding certain capabilities sets a precedent that European states view with apprehension—raising questions about the reliability of American security guarantees.<sup>iss.europa</sup>

Nonetheless, despite these shifts, US influence remains substantial, and Washington continues to support NATO as the primary framework for European defense. However, the US expects Europe to demonstrate greater burden-sharing and military expenditure increases. The 2025 NATO summit saw President Trump press for European members to increase defense spending, with a newly agreed target of 5% of GDP by 2035, aiming to bolster European military capabilities.<sup>+2</sup>

## EU-NATO Relations: Cooperation Amidst Challenges

NATO remains the central pillar of European security, with the EU complementing rather than replacing the Alliance. Nevertheless, balancing autonomous EU defense initiatives with NATO obligations presents institutional and political challenges.

The EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), and the European Defence Fund (EDF) advance European military capabilities and integration, seeking to reduce dependencies and foster interoperability. These frameworks aim to enhance Europe's ability to act independently or in support of NATO operations when necessary. [2](#)

However, tensions persist between the EU's ambitions for strategic autonomy and NATO's established primacy. The US has historically exerted pressure to ensure that EU defense efforts do not "duplicate" NATO structures or "de-link" from the Alliance. The "three D's" policy—avoid de-linking, duplication, and discrimination against non-EU NATO allies—captures this concern. The US remains wary of EU initiatives that might fragment the transatlantic security architecture or divert resources from NATO priorities.

At the same time, European states emphasize that EU defense efforts are not about replacing the US or NATO but about complementing and sharing the burden more equitably. For example, the proposal for a European Defence Mechanism (EDM) aims to pool procurement and enhance European defense capabilities, which could reduce European reliance on US strategic enablers. Importantly, the EDM could also include US defense contractors through qualified majority decisions, preserving transatlantic industrial cooperation while fostering European capability growth.

NATO's recent summit in The Hague (2025) was notable not just for reaffirming Article 5 commitments but also for setting long-term defense spending goals and expanding support for Ukraine. However, Eastern European NATO members remain concerned about the pace and fulfillment of these commitments, given their proximity to Russia and perceived risks of US disengagement.

## Diverging Perspectives on Strategic Autonomy Within the Alliance

Strategic autonomy remains a contested concept across the transatlantic alliance. Within the EU and NATO, perspectives vary significantly:

- **Proponents of Strategic Autonomy within Europe** argue that Europe must develop credible independent military capabilities to ensure it can respond to crises without

undue US dependence. They emphasize that strategic autonomy strengthens NATO by enabling Europe to carry a greater share of its defense burden, modernize its military-industrial base, and safeguard European interests globally. This camp supports initiatives like PESCO, EDF, and enhancing rapid deployment forces as vital to European sovereignty and resilience.

- **Skeptics and Eastern European Allies** worry that emphasizing EU strategic autonomy risks duplicating NATO structures, weakening transatlantic ties, and potentially encouraging a reduction in US commitment. Countries like Poland and the Baltic States remain particularly sensitive to maintaining robust American guarantees against Russian aggression. They emphasize that strategic autonomy should not undermine NATO's collective defense or lead to a two-tiered Europe divided between members with differing security priorities.
- **The US Position** is nuanced but generally supportive of European capability development that complements NATO while cautioning against efforts that might fragment the alliance. US policymakers recognize that encouraging European defense autonomy can free American resources for other priorities (notably the Indo-Pacific), but they also remain vigilant about maintaining NATO cohesion and interoperability. The US is increasingly open to supporting European initiatives like the EDM, but with safeguards ensuring transatlantic industrial and operational ties remain intact.

Thus, strategic autonomy is less about decoupling from NATO or the US and more about "*chosen interdependence*" — the EU's ability to act independently when necessary while remaining integrated within transatlantic frameworks. This balancing act defines much of the current transatlantic discourse.

Transatlantic relations are in flux, driven by shifting US strategic priorities including a pivot to the Indo-Pacific, European ambitions to strengthen autonomous defense capabilities, and ongoing challenges in maintaining NATO's unity. The US remains a pivotal security guarantor but is recalibrating its involvement, prompting the EU to intensify efforts to build credible military capabilities and political cohesion. EU-NATO relations underscore both cooperation and tension, with institutional innovations such as PESCO and the EDF aimed at complementing the Alliance rather than competing with it.

The divergent perspectives on strategic autonomy mirror broader debates on sovereignty, burden-sharing, and alliance management. Europe's strategic autonomy is increasingly framed as a practical necessity to navigate the unpredictability of US commitments and evolving global threats rather than a push to sever ties. The success of this balancing act will shape the future of European and transatlantic security governance.

1. <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/briefs/fit-purpose-reforming-nato-age-trump-20>

2. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/beyond-the-nato-summit-key-questions-remain-for-european-security/>
3. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2025/7/30/eastern-europe-must-earn-its-security-in-a-post-american-nato>
4. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/europe-has-ideas-for-how-to-provide-for-its-own-security-the-us-should-take-notice/>
5. <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2025/03/without-the-us-its-all-about-us-in-european-defence/>
6. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/making-us-uk-special-relationship-fit-purpose>
7. <https://www.friendsofeurope.org/insights/critical-thinking-as-the-nato-summit-nears-is-the-us-european-security-relationship-dead-on-life-support-or-still-in-business/>
8. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2025-06/how-europe-can-save-nato>
9. <https://www.goldmansachs.com/insights/articles/the-future-of-european-defense>

## Case Studies

The European Union's responses to recent security crises, particularly the ongoing Ukraine conflict, illustrate a complex interplay of robust support actions, close EU-US security cooperation, emerging tensions, and the nuanced influence of strategic autonomy debates on EU foreign policy.

### Case Study 1: EU Responses to the Ukraine Conflict

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the EU has significantly scaled up its security, political, and financial support to Ukraine, marking one of the EU's most consequential security engagements in decades. This crisis has acted as a catalyst for the EU to test and extend its security ambitions under the framework of strategic autonomy, while simultaneously deepening cooperation with the United States and NATO.

#### Financial and Military Support

By early 2025, the EU and its member states had committed approximately €134 billion in support to Ukraine, encompassing military aid, humanitarian assistance, economic stabilization, and reconstruction funding. For 2025 alone, the EU pledged over €30.6 billion in support, including €12.5 billion through the Ukraine Facility and €18.1 billion via the G7-led European Recovery Assistance initiative, financed in part by immobilized Russian assets. This financial package underpins Ukraine's defense capacity and economic resilience, enabling sustained resistance against Russian aggression.<sup>+1</sup>

The EU has progressively authorized multiple sanctions packages targeting Russian military-industrial entities, financial institutions, and individuals linked to the war effort. The 16th package, adopted in February 2025, expanded restrictions on Russian aluminum imports, dual-use exports, and extended bans on financial institutions supporting Moscow's war machinery, along with measures targeting Russia's "shadow fleet" involved in sanctions evasion. These sanctions reflect the EU's strategic use of economic tools to undermine Russia's war capabilities.<sup>+1</sup>

Operationally, the EU launched military assistance initiatives, including the European Peace Facility to fund lethal aid, and a dedicated EU Military Assistance Mission in Ukraine (EUMAM UA), focused on training Ukrainian forces. The EU's Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) helped coordinate non-executive missions, reflecting enhanced institutional capacity under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).<sup>2</sup>

## Legal and Accountability Measures

In tandem with material support, the EU has pursued justice-oriented responses, notably by spearheading efforts for a Special Tribunal to prosecute the crime of aggression committed by Russia. Underpinned by the “Schuman Draft Statute,” this tribunal aims to hold Russian political and military leaders accountable, symbolizing the EU’s approach to integrate legal mechanisms into its security policy framework. Complementary initiatives include establishing an International Claims Commission to assess reparations for war damages.

## Institutional and Political Solidarity

The EU’s political leadership has consistently reaffirmed solidarity with Ukraine, emphasizing sovereignty, territorial integrity, and prospective EU accession as key strategic goals. The European Parliament’s March 2025 resolution called for accelerated accession talks and increased EU leadership in negotiations for a just peace settlement, simultaneously urging stricter sanctions on Russia and tighter controls on sanctions evasion. The European Council meetings have underlined unity among member states—with Hungary as a noted exception—highlighting both the political challenges and the prevailing consensus on Ukraine support.

## Case Study 2: EU-US Security Cooperation in the Ukraine Crisis

The Ukraine conflict has strengthened EU-US security cooperation but also exposed tensions reflecting the ongoing debates about strategic autonomy and transatlantic relations.

### Closely Coordinated Military and Economic Assistance

The EU and the US have coordinated extensive military aid packages to Ukraine, with the EU acting as a critical financial and logistical partner complementing US military leadership. The joint G7-led European Recovery Assistance initiative exemplifies this alignment, pooling resources from transatlantic partners to support Ukraine’s immediate defense needs and longer-term recovery.

The EU’s sanctions strategies often parallel US measures, collectively aiming to isolate Russia financially and technologically. This cooperative approach enhances the pressure on Moscow, while reinforcing the strategic linkage between EU and US security policies in the wake of shared concerns about regional stability and global order.

## Tensions and Divergence in Transatlantic Relations

Despite cooperation, there are emerging frictions. The European Parliament's March 2025 resolution criticized recent shifts in tone from the US administration concerning Ukraine, calling for stronger EU strategic leadership and underscoring concerns about potential divergences in policy priorities and approaches to conflict resolution.

Moreover, the EU's pursuit of strategic autonomy sometimes raises cautious responses in Washington. While the US supports Europe's increased defense capabilities to share the burden, it remains vigilant against initiatives that might lead to "de-linking" or duplication of NATO functions. The challenge for the EU is navigating a path that strengthens its independent capacity without undermining transatlantic unity.

The EU's gradual expansion of autonomous military capabilities and institutional innovations—such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF)—are partly motivated by the desire to reduce vulnerabilities exposed during crises like Ukraine while sustaining alliance cohesion.

## Case Study 3: The Influence of Strategic Autonomy Debates on EU Foreign Policy

The Ukraine war has intensified debates on the balance between EU strategic autonomy and transatlantic dependency, influencing broader EU foreign policy.

### Strengthening Strategic Autonomy

The conflict revealed the EU's limitations in acting purely autonomously in hard security domains, given the military and logistical reliance on US and NATO support. This recognition has accelerated institutional and capability-building efforts aimed at enabling the EU to act decisively in future crises, reflecting objectives set forth in the 2022 Strategic Compass.

The EU's commitment to strategic autonomy encompasses enhanced defense industrial capabilities, diversified supply chains for critical technologies, and operational readiness to deploy forces independently or alongside allies. The urgent need to shore up these capacities—especially amid uncertainties about steady US involvement—has garnered increased political support among many member states.

### Balancing Autonomy with Alliance

At the same time, the EU has reaffirmed that strategic autonomy does not mean detaching from NATO or the US. Instead, it embraces a model of "chosen interdependence," where the EU

seeks greater independent capacity while maintaining strong transatlantic partnerships. This approach is reflected in EU policy documents and political rhetoric emphasizing complementarity rather than competition within the alliance framework.

However, divergent views persist inside the EU. Some member states, wary of duplicating NATO or provoking tensions with the US, urge caution and emphasize NATO's primacy. Others see strategic autonomy as indispensable for protecting European interests in a more uncertain global environment and diversifying security partnerships.

## Impact on EU Foreign Policy Orientation

Strategic autonomy has shifted the EU's foreign policy paradigm, encouraging a more assertive stance on global security issues beyond the Ukraine conflict. This includes proactive engagement in broader geopolitical arenas such as the Indo-Pacific, cyber security, hybrid threats, and critical technology governance.

The EU's leadership in convening legal, financial, and diplomatic measures against Russia illustrates an integrated foreign policy approach linking hard power support, normative leadership, and institution-building. It demonstrates the EU's ambition to shape global security governance in line with its values and interests, while hedging against over-dependence on external powers.

## Summary

The EU's responses to the Ukraine conflict provide rich case studies of:

- **Robust financial, military, and legal support to Ukraine**, demonstrating the EU's growing security ambitions in crisis response.[+1](#)
- **Deepened yet sometimes tense cooperation with the United States**, reflecting both shared objectives and the challenges of navigating strategic autonomy within a transatlantic alliance.[+1](#)
- **The evolving influence of strategic autonomy debates**, which shape EU foreign policy toward greater self-reliance while striving to preserve alliance cohesion, reflecting the current balance of European security thinking.

These case studies collectively illustrate how recent security crises function as both a test and a driver for the EU's evolving security role amidst shifting global power dynamics.

1. <https://eucrim.eu/news/eu-reactions-to-russian-war-against-ukraine-overview-end-of-january-2025-april-2025/>
2. <https://academic.oup.com/yel/advance-article/doi/10.1093/yel/yeaf003/8112000>
3. <https://edoc.coe.int/en/an-overview/12113-three-years-of-russia-s-war-of-aggression-council-of-europe-action-in-support-of-ukraine-report-by-the-secretary-general.html>
4. <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/publications/eu-trade-sanctions-in-response-to-situation-in-ukraine-.html>
5. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IN11897>
6. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2025/3/6/russia-ukraine-war-live-macron-says-europe-under-threat-ahead-of-eu-summit>

# Challenges and Constraints

The European Union's pursuit of **strategic autonomy** faces multiple interconnected challenges and constraints spanning political, institutional, member state divergences, and technological dependencies. These factors collectively shape the pace, scope, and feasibility of the EU's ambition to act independently and decisively in security, defense, and broader strategic domains.

## 1. Political Challenges

### Divergent National Interests and Strategic Cultures

One of the most significant political challenges is the diversity of priorities and threat perceptions among EU member states. Countries differ markedly in their views on security threats, the desirability and extent of strategic autonomy, and the preferred balance between EU autonomy and transatlantic ties. For example, Eastern European countries remain highly reliant on the US-led NATO for their security, particularly fearing Russian aggression, and are cautious about initiatives that might weaken the transatlantic alliance or duplicate NATO structures. In contrast, some Western member states advocate stronger EU defense capabilities and more independence from US security guarantees. This divergence complicates reaching consensus on unified defense policies and operational decisions, leading to fragmented or cautious approaches to autonomy.<sup>+1</sup>

### Reluctance to Pool Sovereignty on Sensitive Security Issues

Achieving strategic autonomy requires member states to pool sovereignty in defense and security decision-making, a politically sensitive area that many are reluctant to fully cede. Defense remains a deeply national prerogative, linked to sovereignty and identity, and member states differ in their willingness to transfer authority to EU institutions or collective bodies. This reluctance slows decision-making, dilutes collective action, and limits progress toward cohesive EU military autonomy.<sup>+1</sup>

### Political Will and Cohesion Under Stress

The political environment is challenged by internal EU tensions, including differing economic priorities, social pressures, and political populism in some countries, which can undermine solidarity and willingness to support costly defense initiatives. The Ukraine conflict has increased urgency around autonomy, but sustained political cohesion is needed to implement long-term strategies. Also, coordination with NATO and maintaining strong US-EU relations adds a layer of diplomatic complexity to cultivating genuine strategic autonomy. <sup>+2</sup>

## 2. Institutional Challenges

### Complex and Slow Decision-Making Processes

The EU's institutional architecture involves multiple bodies requiring consensus or qualified majority voting on security issues, leading to slow and sometimes cumbersome decision-making. Defense procurement, capability development, and crisis response often stall due to the need for unanimity or broad agreement, hindering rapid reactions to emerging threats. The bureaucratic complexity reduces responsiveness and hinders the swift mobilization of resources necessary for achieving operational autonomy.[1](#)

### Fragmentation of Defense Initiatives

The EU's defense capability projects are spread across various programs and frameworks, such as the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), European Defence Fund (EDF), and national programs. While these initiatives aim to complement each other, lack of coordination and a unified strategic vision can lead to duplication, inefficiencies, and uneven progress among member states. The divergence in national defense industries with competing interests also reduces the coherence and scalability of joint projects.[+1](#)

### Limited Supranational Authority in Security and Defense

Unlike other EU policy areas, security and defense integration remain predominantly intergovernmental, with limited supranational authority vested in European institutions. This constrains the EU's ability to enforce binding commitments and implement collective strategic decisions independently of member states' preferences. Institutional fragmentation between the EU and NATO, with overlapping yet distinct mandates and membership, complicates coherent policy alignment and operational synergy.[+1](#)

## 3. Member State Divergences

### Varied Defense Spending and Capability Gaps

EU member states exhibit wide disparities in defense budgets, military capabilities, and defense technology investments. Some countries exceed NATO's 2% GDP defense spending guideline, while others fall short, limiting the EU's composite military power. This unevenness inhibits the formation of an adequately equipped and interoperable European force capable of autonomous operations. Financial constraints within less affluent member states also impede contribution to collective initiatives.[+2](#)

## Different Strategic Priorities and External Orientations

Some members emphasize transatlantic partnerships and NATO's primacy, while others seek to diversify security partnerships and strengthen EU-led security architectures. These competing priorities manifest in policy disagreements over strategic autonomy's scope—military, technological, economic, or diplomatic—and levels of ambition. Divergences also exist on trade policy (protectionism vs. open markets) and industrial policy, influencing defense industry consolidation and technology development.[2](#)

## National Industrial and Technological Fragmentation

Member states have distinct national defense industries with varying degrees of competitiveness and specialization, creating challenges for standardization and interoperability. Rival national interests can hamper collaboration on joint procurement and research projects, limiting the emergence of pan-European defense champions. This fragmentation weakens the EU's defense technological and industrial base and prolongs external dependencies.[+1](#)

## 4. Technological Dependencies

### Lagging Behind in Critical Technologies

The EU remains behind the US and China in key strategic technological areas such as semiconductors, artificial intelligence, cloud computing, cyber defense technologies, and advanced weapon systems. This technological gap creates vulnerabilities in security and defense and limits the EU's ability to assert autonomous decision-making and operational effectiveness.[+1](#)

### Supply Chain Vulnerabilities and Overreliance on External Providers

COVID-19 and recent geopolitical crises revealed fragilities in global supply chains, including for medical equipment, critical raw materials, and technology components essential for defense capabilities. The EU depends heavily on foreign technologies and suppliers, particularly from the US and Asia, in defense and dual-use sectors, reducing its ability to sustain prolonged independent operations and exposing it to external coercion or disruption.[+1](#)

### Industrial Investment Gaps and Innovation Challenges

Closing the EU's innovation gap requires massive investments in R&D and infrastructure. Both public and private sector financing must be mobilized at a scale that exceeds current commitment levels. The complexity of coordinating funding across multiple member states and

sectors adds to the challenge of accelerating technology development and scaling production capacity in strategically vital areas such as chips and aerospace.<sup>+1</sup>

## Summary Overview Table

Challenge Category	Specific Issues	Impact on Strategic Autonomy
Political	Divergent member priorities; reluctance to pool sovereignty; cohesion challenges	Fragmented security policy; limited unified action
Institutional	Slow decision-making; fragmented defense initiatives; limited supranational power	Delayed capability development; inefficient coordination
Member State Divergences	Defense spending disparities; varying strategic outlooks; fragmented defense industries	Insufficient military power; industrial inefficiency
Technological Dependencies	Lagging in key tech; supply chain risks; investment gaps	Reduced operational independence; vulnerability to external disruption

## Recent Policy Initiatives Addressing Challenges

To confront these challenges, the EU is pursuing several ambitious initiatives such as:

- The **ReArm Europe Plan / Readiness 2030** aims to mobilize up to €800 billion in defense spending jointly and nationally, introducing fiscal flexibility and loan instruments to boost modernization.
- The **European Chips Act** targets doubling Europe's semiconductor production share to 20% by 2030, addressing critical technological shortfalls.
- **Regulatory measures** to screen foreign investments and secure critical infrastructures help mitigate technological and economic vulnerabilities.

- Enhanced initiatives under PESCO and the EDF seek to harmonize defense industrial development and capability projects despite fragmentation.<sup>3</sup>

The EU's journey toward **strategic autonomy** is a complex endeavor constrained by the political landscape of member state divergences, institutional complexities, and technological dependencies. While ambitious policy frameworks and funding initiatives are in place to address these issues, overcoming deeply rooted sovereignty concerns, forging unified political will, and closing technological gaps remain critical challenges. The EU's ability to balance autonomy aspirations with pragmatic transatlantic cooperation will ultimately define the success of its evolving global security role.

1. <https://viewpoint.bnpparibas-am.com/european-strategic-autonomy-imperative-challenges-commitments/>
2. <https://china-cee.eu/2025/05/28/the-road-to-european-strategic-autonomy%E2%80%A2internal-conflicts-and-outlook/>
3. <https://www.socialeurope.eu/a-changing-europe-strategic-autonomy-and-security-in-2025-and-beyond>
4. <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/monographs/quest-for-strategic-autonomy-europe-grapples-with-the-us-china-rivalry/>
5. [https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe/strategic-plan\\_en](https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe/strategic-plan_en)
6. <https://www.celis.institute/celis-blog/the-eus-evolving-approach-to-open-strategic-autonomy-a-critical-perspective-on-the-competitiveness-compass-for-the-eu-and-other-recent-policy-developments/>
7. [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech\\_25\\_1122](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_25_1122)
8. <https://cpram.com/fra/en/individual/publications/experts/article/european-strategic-autonomy-also-encompasses-defense>
9. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2025/07/03/can-the-eu-become-a-strategic-normative-power-in-a-fractured-world/>
10. <https://iari.site/2025/05/13/the-strategic-autonomy-of-the-eu-legal-aspects-and-institutional-challenges/>

## Policy Implications and Future Outlook

The current trajectory of the European Union's (EU) security policy reflects a critical moment marked by significant policy implications, evolving pathways for strengthening strategic autonomy, opportunities for deepening EU-US partnerships, and the unfolding of multiple future scenarios for the EU's global security role. These dynamics are shaped by the ongoing war in Ukraine, shifting global power balances, internal integration challenges, and rapid technological change.

### Policy Implications of the Current EU Security Trajectory

The EU is moving decisively toward **developing a European Defence Union (EDU)** as a core framework to raise defense spending, deepen cooperation with NATO, and enhance collective military capabilities. The European Commission's 2025 agenda foresees laying foundational actions through an upcoming White Paper on the Future of European Defence, emphasizing a shift from a reactive posture to a **proactive, preparedness-based approach** under the Preparedness Union Strategy and the European Internal Security Strategy (ProtectEU).<sup>1</sup>

Policy implications include:

- **Increased Defense Spending and Integration:**

The EU's commitment to mobilizing resources such as through the ReArm Europe initiative — which aims to channel up to €800 billion into joint and national defense spending — signals a major escalation of financial and political will for military modernization and capability development.[swp-berlin+1](#)

- **Enhanced Internal and External Security Linkages:**

ProtectEU and related policies reflect an understanding that *internal security* (counterterrorism, cyber defense, and countering hybrid threats) and *external defense* are interdependent. The EU is integrating security considerations across policy areas, thereby strengthening the resilience of societies and democracies against both traditional and emerging threats.[home-affairs.europa+1](#)

- **Strategic Autonomy as a Framework and Challenge:**

The trajectory reflects growing emphasis on **strategic autonomy**, operationalized through collective defense capabilities, technological sovereignty (e.g., European Chips Act), and institutional innovation such as PESCO and the EDF. However, operationalizing this autonomy remains complex given political divergences and technological dependencies revealed by geopolitical crises.[+1](#)

## Possible Pathways for Strengthening Strategic Autonomy

To strengthen strategic autonomy, the EU could pursue multiple interconnected pathways:

### 1. Accelerating Defense Industrial and Technological Sovereignty:

- The continued rollout and expansion of the **European Defence Fund (EDF)** will encourage joint R&D projects, innovation in dual-use technologies, and reduce reliance on foreign suppliers in critical sectors such as semiconductors, aerospace, and cyber defense.[+1](#)
- The **European Chips Act** and related investment plans are designed to bolster European production capacities in key technologies, addressing pressing supply chain vulnerabilities.

### 2. Enhancing Operational Military Capabilities and Rapid Deployment Capacity:

- Increasing the EU's rapid deployment capacity to enable effective, autonomous responses to crises without full dependence on NATO assets remains a priority. The Strategic Compass 2022 sets out a target of up to 5,000 troops ready for quick deployment, showing commitment to tangible operational readiness.
- Expanding Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and joint capability development initiatives will improve interoperability and burden-sharing among willing member states.

### 3. Institutional and Governance Reforms:

- Streamlining decision-making in security and defense to overcome the consensus-based gridlock typical of intergovernmental arrangements is essential. Initiatives to shift toward qualified majority voting in certain defense areas could

accelerate responsiveness and unity.

- The upcoming White Paper on the Future of European Defence is expected to explore institutional reforms fostering a more integrated European Defence Union framework, potentially strengthening supranational roles in capability prioritization and crisis management.[+1](#)

#### 4. Strengthening the Linkages between Internal and External Security:

- Implementation of the ProtectEU strategy will solidify a whole-of-society approach to internal security by enhancing law enforcement, border management, cybersecurity, and resilience to hybrid threats. This integrated approach better equips the Union to mitigate destabilizing factors both inside and outside its borders.[+2](#)

## Enhancing EU-US Partnerships

While striving for greater strategic autonomy, the EU remains committed to maintaining robust **partnerships with the United States** and NATO, recognizing the enduring role of the transatlantic alliance in European and global security.

- **Burden-Sharing and Complementarity:**

The EU-US partnership is marked by efforts to balance autonomy ambitions with the practical need to share security burdens. The US expects increased European defense expenditures, while Europe aims to develop capabilities that complement rather than duplicate NATO's functions.[+1](#)

- **Deepening Cooperation on Emerging Threats:**

Cybersecurity, intelligence sharing, counterterrorism, and hybrid threat response represent key areas for transatlantic collaboration. EU strategies increasingly emphasize operational cooperation with US agencies and allied security services, fostering resilience against evolving threats such as cyber attacks and disinformation campaigns.[+1](#)

- **Managing Divergences and Building Trust:**

The EU must continue diplomacy to manage occasional tensions stemming from differing priorities or policies, such as divergent approaches to Ukraine or defense

industry regulation. Transparency, regular consultations, and joint strategic exercises can reinforce transatlantic trust and interoperability.<sup>+1</sup>

- Promoting Multilateralism and Global Governance:

The EU and US increasingly seek to align on global strategic challenges, including arms control, non-proliferation, and technology standards governance, which together advance global security stability and uphold international norms.<sup>+1</sup>

## Potential Future Scenarios for the EU's Global Security Role

Overall, the EU's future global security role will unfold along a continuum shaped by its strategic choices, external geopolitical pressures, and internal cohesion.

Scenario	Description	Implications
<b>1. Emerging European Defence Union</b>	The EU succeeds in operationalizing a robust European Defence Union, integrating defense spending, decision-making, and capabilities with institutional reforms. Strategic autonomy grows in tandem with strong NATO coordination.	The EU becomes a credible autonomous actor capable of rapid crisis response, influencing global security while maintaining a strong transatlantic alliance. Enhanced governance and industrial base underpin sustainable autonomy.
<b>2. Partial Autonomy with Continued Transatlantic Dependence</b>	Progress on strategic autonomy is gradual and patchy, constrained by political divergences and technological gaps. The EU remains heavily reliant on US-led NATO for core military guarantees.	The EU plays a secondary role, focusing on niche capabilities and internal security, while relying on the US for deterrence. Opportunities for deeper defense integration are missed amid transatlantic dependency.
<b>3. Fragmented and Reactive EU Security Policy</b>	Political disagreements, institutional inertia, and external shocks undermine EU security policy coherence. Fragmentation worsens, and the EU struggles to act cohesively or strengthen autonomy.	The EU's inability to adapt lowers its global relevance, weakening European security, and increasing vulnerability to external threats. Pressure grows on member states to reinforce bilateral or

**4. Strategic  
Autonomy with  
Global  
Leadership  
Ambition**

The EU fully embraces strategic autonomy, developing advanced capabilities and an assertive diplomatic posture extending beyond Europe. It pursues diversified security partnerships globally, including in the Indo-Pacific and Africa.

sub-regional defense ties independently.

The EU emerges as a major global security actor, shaping norms, crisis management, and multilateral governance. This scenario requires deep political commitment and overcoming internal divisions.

The policy implications of the EU’s evolving security trajectory are profound. The Union is transitioning from a primarily economic and regulatory actor to a more strategic, security-conscious global power aiming for “**chosen interdependence**”—an autonomous yet cooperative European security posture. Realizing this vision requires concerted investments in defense industrial capacity, operational readiness, governance reform, and diplomatic coherence.<sup>+1</sup>

Enhancing EU-US partnerships will remain vital, not simply as complementary actors but as strategic partners navigating a complex global order characterized by great power competition, technological upheaval, and multifaceted security challenges. The EU’s future as a global security actor depends on its ability to integrate political will with practical capabilities while fostering close transatlantic and multilateral cooperation.

1. <https://europeanmovement.eu/policy-focus/commission-work-programme-2025/>
2. [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-presents-protecteu-internal-security-strategy-2025-04-01\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-presents-protecteu-internal-security-strategy-2025-04-01_en)
3. [https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/jrc-news-and-updates/science-behind-new-european-internal-security-strategy-2025-04-01\\_en](https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/jrc-news-and-updates/science-behind-new-european-internal-security-strategy-2025-04-01_en)
4. [https://www.eumonitor.eu/9353000/1/j4nvhdjdk3hydza\\_j9vvik7m1c3gyxp/vmm7rfrp77ux](https://www.eumonitor.eu/9353000/1/j4nvhdjdk3hydza_j9vvik7m1c3gyxp/vmm7rfrp77ux)
5. <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/strengthening-europes-capacity-to-act-in-foreign-and-security-policy>
6. [https://institutdelors.eu/content/uploads/2025/06/PB\\_250408\\_Politique\\_europeenne\\_sec\\_urite\\_interieur\\_Mafart\\_EN.pdf](https://institutdelors.eu/content/uploads/2025/06/PB_250408_Politique_europeenne_sec_urite_interieur_Mafart_EN.pdf)
7. <https://www.cer.eu/publications/archive/policy-brief/2025/towards-eu-defence-union>
8. <https://securityconference.org/publikationen/munich-security-report-2025/european-union/>
9. <https://www.bruegel.org/analysis/thinking-european-first-and-its-implications>
10. <https://www.digital-operational-resilience-act.com>

## Conclusion

The report's key findings reveal a complex and evolving balance between the European Union's (EU) pursuit of **strategic autonomy** and its enduring **transatlantic dependency**, positioning Europe as an increasingly capable yet interdependent global security actor. This duality defines the EU's current and future security role amidst shifting geopolitical dynamics, institutional developments, and member state considerations.

The EU's quest for strategic autonomy reflects a growing recognition that Europe must develop the capacity to make independent decisions and act decisively in its security and defense policies without excessive reliance on the United States and NATO. This aspiration has strengthened in response to global power shifts—most notably the US-China rivalry—and the unpredictability of US policies, highlighted by the Trump administration's transactional approach and the redirection of US priorities toward the Indo-Pacific region.

Strategic autonomy encompasses multiple dimensions, including protective autonomy, securing resilient defense industrial bases and critical supply chains; autonomous military capabilities and operational readiness; and diplomatic and multilateral influence projection. However, the EU remains deeply linked to the transatlantic security framework, which continues to provide foundational deterrence and military capabilities, particularly nuclear defense. NATO's primacy in European security is enshrined in EU treaties, and member states vary in their enthusiasm for expanding autonomy based on their strategic cultures and threat perceptions.

This dynamic creates inherent tension—while the EU strives for enhanced independence, it concurrently acknowledges the practical necessity and political benefit of maintaining a robust partnership with the US and NATO. This balance can be characterized as “**chosen interdependence**”, where the EU strengthens autonomous capabilities to complement, not supplant, the transatlantic alliance.

The EU has made substantial institutional strides supporting strategic autonomy. Key frameworks such as the **Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP)**, **Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)**, and the **European Defence Fund (EDF)** provide the mechanisms for capability development, joint procurement, research, and operational command. Initiatives like the **ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030**, aiming to mobilize up to €800 billion for defense spending and modernization, demonstrate serious political and financial commitments to upgrading Europe's defense posture.

Moreover, the **Strategic Compass (2022)** operationalizes these ambitions by setting concrete targets like establishing a 5,000-strong EU rapid deployment capacity and enhancing crisis response capabilities. The EU's approach also increasingly integrates internal security with external defense under initiatives such as ProtectEU, recognizing the interconnected threats posed by cyber, hybrid warfare, and supply chain disruptions.

These policy efforts underscore that strategic autonomy is not simply a military endeavor but a holistic strategy spanning technology sovereignty, economic resilience, energy independence, and diplomatic influence.

Despite progress, the EU faces significant challenges in realizing full strategic autonomy. Political divergence among member states remains a primary constraint. Eastern European countries, highly dependent on US guarantees against Russian threats, often prioritize NATO cohesion over EU autonomy initiatives, while Western states tend to advocate more ambitiously for defense integration and independent capabilities.

Institutionally, the EU's decision-making in security remains fragmented and slow, often requiring unanimous approval for key defense policies, which dilutes political cohesion and hampers rapid response. Technological dependencies constitute another major limitation. Europe lags behind the US and China in critical technologies such as semiconductors, AI, and advanced defense systems, and still relies heavily on external suppliers for these components.

Supply chain vulnerabilities, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical crises, revealed the EU's exposure to external disruptions, reinforcing the need for industrial and technological sovereignty. However, investments remain uneven across member states, with differing industrial interests and defense budgets creating capability gaps that complicate collective autonomy efforts.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has been a pivotal catalyst, exposing both the EU's security limitations and its resolve. The EU's extensive military, financial, diplomatic, and legal support for Ukraine underscores a new level of engagement in European security affairs. The conflict has accelerated discussions on strategic autonomy by highlighting Europe's need to reduce overdependence on the US while simultaneously deepening EU-US and EU-NATO cooperation in military aid and sanctions coordination.

This crisis has delineated the practical boundaries of autonomy: while the EU has increased capacity and ambition, critical support—especially in heavy military equipment and deterrence—remains reliant largely on the US and NATO. Concurrently, debates on strategic autonomy continue to shape EU foreign policy, balancing autonomy imperatives with alliance commitments.

The report identifies several possible future pathways for the EU:

- Emergence of a robust European Defence Union marked by deeper integration, institutional reforms, and credible autonomous capabilities that work alongside NATO to provide collective security.
- Partial autonomy with continued transatlantic dependence, where progress is incremental and the EU remains primarily reliant on NATO for core defense guarantees,

focusing autonomous efforts on niche capabilities and internal security.

- Fragmentation and reactive policy, wherein political divisions, institutional inertia, and external shocks undermine EU security policy coherence, weakening European security and global influence.
- Strategic autonomy with global leadership ambitions, where the EU attains advanced capabilities and an assertive diplomatic posture, engaging globally beyond Europe in regions like the Indo-Pacific, underpinned by strong internal integration and external partnerships.

The EU today stands as a **complex security actor**, negotiating the path between **greater self-reliance and pragmatic interdependence**. Strategic autonomy is increasingly recognized as vital for safeguarding European interests in a world marked by multipolarity and rapid technological change. At the same time, the EU's security remains embedded in the transatlantic framework that continues to ensure deterrence and defense credibility.

The sustainability of the EU's security advancement depends on political will to reconcile internal divergences, accelerate institutional reforms, and address technological gaps while nurturing its alliance with the US. As strategic autonomy expands, it redefines Europe's role on the world stage—not as a unilateral power but as a capable, sovereign, and cooperative player in global security governance.

## Appendices

Here is supplementary information including relevant EU policy documents, glossaries, and data references to support the analysis in your report on the EU's evolving role in global security, especially regarding strategic autonomy and transatlantic dependency:

### 1. Key EU Policy Documents and Initiatives:

- **Strategic Compass for Security and Defence (2022):** An operational roadmap setting concrete priorities such as rapid deployment capacities (e.g., 5,000-strong EU rapid reaction force), crisis management, partnerships with NATO and others, and capability development. It serves as a key framework driving the EU's strategic autonomy goals.[1](#)
- **European Defence Fund (EDF):** A fund established to finance collaborative defense research and development projects across EU member states, promoting innovation, industrial competitiveness, and reducing technological dependencies. The EDF supports joint capabilities aligned with strategic autonomy ambitions.[2](#)
- **Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO):** A framework allowing participating EU states to deepen defense collaboration through joint projects, contributing to interoperability and capability pooling, key to building autonomous military forces.[1](#)
- **European Economic Security Strategy (2023):** Focuses on assessing and managing economic security risks, targeting strategic dependencies (e.g., in technology sectors). It promotes resilience by reducing vulnerabilities such as supply chain risks and economic coercion, aligning with broader concepts of open strategic autonomy.[1](#)
- **Regulation on Screening Foreign Direct Investment (EU 2019/452):** This legal framework protects critical infrastructure and technologies by monitoring and potentially blocking foreign investments that could threaten EU security or public order, contributing to protective autonomy.[1](#)
- **European Chips Act (Planned/Under Development):** Aims to boost semiconductor production capacity in Europe, countering critical technological dependencies that affect defense and economic security.[1](#)
- **White Paper on the Future of European Defence (forthcoming):** Expected to propose institutional reforms and strategic pathways to deepen EU defense integration and strategic autonomy.[1](#)

- **European Internal Security Strategy (ProtectEU):** Integrates internal and external security, focusing on hybrid threats, cybersecurity, critical infrastructure protection, and societal resilience, reflecting the EU's holistic approach to strategic autonomy.

## 2. Glossary of Relevant Terms:

- **Strategic Autonomy:** The EU's capability to act independently and decisively in strategic areas—including security, defense, economy, technology—without excessive reliance on external actors such as the US and NATO. It encompasses political unity, capabilities, and sovereignty over critical domains.
- **Protective Autonomy:** Ensuring resilient defense industrial bases, safeguarding critical supply chains and technologies, and protecting strategic sectors against vulnerabilities from external dependencies or hostile actions.
- **Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO):** A voluntary mechanism for EU member states to jointly develop defense capabilities, increase interoperability, and deepen military collaboration.
- **European Defence Fund (EDF):** A financial instrument co-funding joint defense research and capability development projects to foster innovation and strategic sovereignty.
- **Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP):** The EU's framework for civilian and military crisis management operations and capability development under shared security objectives.
- **Open Strategic Autonomy:** An evolving EU concept balancing openness to global trade and cooperation with safeguarding critical strategic interests and reducing risky dependencies.
- **“Three D’s” Policy:** The US framework urging that EU strategic autonomy initiatives should avoid De-linking from NATO, Duplicating its efforts, or Discriminating against non-EU NATO members.

## 3. Supporting Data References:

- The EU is mobilizing up to **€800 billion** for defense modernization and capacity building through initiatives like **ReArm Europe / Readiness 2030**, representing a major financial commitment to achieving strategic autonomy.[+1](#)

- The **European Peace Facility** and **Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC)** enhance capability for deploying and managing CSDP missions, increasing operational autonomy.
- Defense industrial fragmentation persists, with diverse national defense industries and budgets across member states, affecting collaborative defense projects' coherence and scale.[+1](#)
- EU regulations on foreign investment screening identify sectors such as aerospace, defense, energy, and digital infrastructure as critical, underscoring the legal tools used to protect EU sovereignty and operational independence.[+1](#)

#### 4. **Scholarly and Policy Research Insights:**

- Analyses highlight the tension between maintaining openness and achieving autonomy, particularly in the framework of **open strategic autonomy**, which stresses "as open as possible, as autonomous as necessary".
- The EU's **de-risking strategy** involves supply chain diversification, investment in domestic processing and manufacturing capacities, and stockpiling to reduce vulnerabilities while fostering cooperation with trusted partners.
- The evolving concept of strategic autonomy integrates economic competitiveness, security, and industrial policy as mutually reinforcing elements critical to the EU's future global role.[+1](#)

These documents, terminologies, and data points provide robust support for understanding the EU's policy landscape, institutional mechanisms, and challenges in developing strategic autonomy while maintaining transatlantic relations.

1. [https://ecipe.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/ECI\\_23\\_PolicyBrief\\_13-2023\\_LY02.pdf](https://ecipe.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/ECI_23_PolicyBrief_13-2023_LY02.pdf)
2. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733589/EPRS\\_BRI\(2022\)733589\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733589/EPRS_BRI(2022)733589_EN.pdf)
3. [https://www.europeanpapers.eu/en/system/files/pdf\\_version/EP\\_EF\\_2023\\_I\\_012\\_Charlotte\\_Beaucillon\\_00664.pdf](https://www.europeanpapers.eu/en/system/files/pdf_version/EP_EF_2023_I_012_Charlotte_Beaucillon_00664.pdf)
4. <https://www.euro-access.eu/en/calls/2085/Open-strategic-autonomy-economic-and-research-security-in-EU-foreign-policy>
5. <https://www.celis.institute/celis-blog/the-eus-evolving-approach-to-open-strategic-autonomy-a-critical-perspective-on-the-competitiveness-compass-for-the-eu-and-other-recent-policy-developments/>

6. [https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/strategy/strategy-research-and-innovation/europe-world/international-cooperation/strategic-autonomy-and-european-economic-and-research-security\\_en](https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/strategy/strategy-research-and-innovation/europe-world/international-cooperation/strategic-autonomy-and-european-economic-and-research-security_en)
7. <https://blogs.sussex.ac.uk/uktpo/files/2023/09/BP76-OPEN-STRATEGIC-AUTONOMY-A-S-EU-TRADE-POLICY.pdf>
8. <https://www.isdp.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Special-Paper-Johannes.pdf>
9. [https://www.europeanpapers.eu/en/system/files/pdf\\_version/EP\\_EF\\_2023\\_I\\_014\\_Cecile\\_Rapoport\\_00666.pdf](https://www.europeanpapers.eu/en/system/files/pdf_version/EP_EF_2023_I_014_Cecile_Rapoport_00666.pdf)
10. <https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/content/open-strategic-autonomy-making-europe-stronger-global-player>