Charting the Strategic Autonomy of the EU

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The last decade has witnessed drastic changes in the global political landscape. The growing number of external threats, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese growth, the Russia-Ukraine war and the unpredictability of the USA under the Trump presidency, necessitated the redefinition of the European Union's plans and goals. The concept that has been frequently triggering heated discussions among scholars, politicians and EU policymakers is strategic autonomy. This multi-layered term can be broadly defined as the capabilities to act independently in strategically significant

areas, such as security, economy and geopolitics, and has become central to debates on the Union's defence policies (Damen, 2022). This paper contributes to a better understanding of the European Union's capacity to reach such autonomy and examines how these ambitions translate into real actions in light of the progressing US-China competition.

In order to analyse the EU's strategic autonomy and its role in the US-China rivalry, this paper will be divided into two main sections. Firstly, we will briefly outline how the European Union's foreign and security policy evolved over the years and what events contributed to its development, starting from 2016. Building on this, the third section focuses on how the European Union's pursuit of strategic autonomy manifests within the evolving dynamics of the US–China rivalry. It assesses the degree to which the EU can act independently between these two major powers across key domains such as security, defence, and economic policy. By analysing the Union's relations with both Washington and Beijing, as well as its attempts to balance normative, economic and strategic interests, this section aims to evaluate the EU's overall position in the emerging multipolar order and the practical limits of its autonomy.

The Evolution of the EU's Strategic Autonomy

To begin with, it is necessary to trace back the evolution of the discussed concept and examine the key moments that defined the EU's approach to its security and defence. Although the EU's ambition to become a global autonomous leader was first discussed in the previous century, it was the 2016 EU Global Strategy that explicitly underlined the Union's pursuit of strategic autonomy (Kilic, 2024). This ambitious plan envisaged an increased military capacity to protect the European neighbourhood, significantly lowering the EU's reliance on the US. Furthermore, among the main factors that compelled the EU to aim to reduce dependence on other actors that are crucial for our discussion were the Trump election in 2016 (Fischer, 2017), the intensifying competition between China and the USA (Steinbach, 2023), the COVID-19 pandemic (Damen, 2022), and the Russian aggression on Ukraine (Helwig, 2023).

It was indeed in 2016 that the pursuit of autonomy rapidly accelerated. Trump's election prompted the European Union to more seriously reflect on its own military capabilities and the future of transatlantic relations (Fisher, 2017). However, it was numerous subsequent events that uncovered clear shortcomings in the Union's defence strategy and exposed dependence on both the USA and China. While the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how heavily EU member states rely on imports of crucial products from China (Damen, 2022), the Russian aggression on Ukraine raised questions about military dependence on the United States (Helwig, 2023). As a result, despite ambitious plans, the Union remains

closely interdependent with both of these major global powers, although in different policy areas.

Above all, the EU should first strive for unity within its internal structures. Existing divergences between member states and a lack of consensus on which strategies to pursue significantly hinder the achievement of autonomy. While France insists on strengthening the EU's independence, especially in military aspects, the Baltic States, as well as Central and Eastern European countries, approach such ideas with more scepticism and hesitance, mainly due to their proximity to Russia (Helwig, 2023). Indeed, the idea of the European Union's strategic autonomy has never been completely embraced by the Member States, and it still remains the point of contest (Damen, 2022). Therefore, it can be concluded that the European Union's pursuit of strategic autonomy has been influenced by a series of global events that exposed its structural dependence on major superpowers. The following section will elaborate on this issue within a wider global context, discussing the European Union's position in the USA-China rivalry and multipolar global order.

The EU's Strategic Autonomy in the USA-China Context

Strategic autonomy has never been pursued in a vacuum. For the European Union, the pursuit of greater independence coincides with a period of sustained great-power competition between the United States and China. While the previous section outlined the evolution of the European Union's pursuit of strategic autonomy and the internal divisions that have shaped it, the concept cannot be fully understood without considering the tightrope that European institutions must walk between their largest economic partner (Eurostat, 2025) and their primary security guarantor. This section seeks to answer the question: To what extent can the EU act autonomously between these two powers, and in which domains?

To assess the extent of the EU's autonomy between the United States and China, it is necessary to first examine its dependence on the United States in the field of security and defence. Helwig (2023) presents a sceptical view, portraying the EU as an organisation with growing capacity but "limited agency". This assessment is echoed by Cameron (2022), who argues that the EU remains reluctant to invest seriously in defence, continuing to rely on U.S.-made weaponry for "defence on the cheap". Security dependence also encompasses technological reliance on U.S. command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) infrastructure, without which the EU would struggle to plan or sustain complex operations (Meijer, 2021). Equally significant is operational dependence, reflected in Europe's limited strategic airlift, sealift, and aerial refuelling capacities, which continue to rely heavily on U.S. logistical support (Efstathiou, 2019).

Yet, more recent developments cast doubt on these assumptions. The perception of a weakening transatlantic relationship (Knutsen, 2022) and uncertainty about sustained American engagement in Europe has reignited debate about European self-reliance in security matters. Rutigliano (2023) notes that Denmark's decision to abandon its thirty-year opt-out from EU defence structures such as PESCO and the EDA was a direct response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, suggesting that the war acted as a catalyst for rethinking European security dependencies.

Nevertheless, autonomy in security and defence remains limited. Michaels and Sus (2024) conclude that even after the strengthening of European military capabilities post-2022, the United States remains "in the driver's seat" (p. 57). Their survey data show that only France, out of six European countries studied, would support a full U.S. withdrawal from Europe to secure genuine EU-led defence autonomy (p. 58). Meijer and Brooks (2021) describe this situation as one of "strategic cacophony", driven by divergent national threat perceptions. They further argue that without U.S. support, a joint European command-and-control architecture would likely collapse, given the "cacophony" of a fully autonomous EU system (p. 30).

Therefore, we can surmise that autonomy in security and defence remains limited, with the EU acting as a complementary player enabling NATO and member states to be more effective rather than being autonomous. This finding highlights that in its relationship with the United States, the EU's strategic autonomy remains largely aspirational. A sharp contrast to the more economic forms of autonomy it seeks to develop in relation to China, discussed in the following section.

The EU's pursuit of strategic autonomy is not only defined in relation to the United States but also equally conditioned by its relationship with China. In its China policy, the EU formally states that it seeks a "renewed, assertive and coherent ... approach ... that strengthens the EU's strategic autonomy to defend its values and economic interests" (European Parliament, 2024, p. 6). The structural weight of China as an economic partner and strategic competitor thus shapes how the EU conceives autonomy.

First, Europe's economic and technological interdependence with China limits the practical reach of autonomy. The EU still relies on Chinese supply chains, advanced manufacturing and critical raw materials, which weakens its freedom of manoeuvre. As one analyst observes: "dependence on China is not limited to critical raw materials ... the Chinese contribution to supply chains is not limited to cheap labour" (Rühlig, 2024).

Second, the China dimension shifts the locus of strategic autonomy beyond procurement and defence to wider domains: technology, investment, trade and raw-material security. For example, policy analysis highlights four dimensions of what Europe calls "open strategic autonomy" in relation to China: supply-chain resilience, national security, values and sustainability, and technological competitiveness (Rühlig, 2024). The EU's capacity to act

autonomously, therefore, depends not only on defence hardware but also on shaping those systemic interdependencies.

In sum, while the EU may rhetorically aim to sit as a third pole between the United States and China, its actual margin of manoeuvre is constrained by deep-seated dependencies. Whether in the domain of high-tech supply chains, raw-material sourcing or norms competition, the EU remains structurally anchored by China even as it seeks autonomy. The above findings reinforce the broader conclusion that the EU's strategic autonomy remains largely aspirational rather than achieved.

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