Rethinking EU Strategic Autonomy

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As the world order shifts, the concept of strategic autonomy, previously limited to European military circles, grew into a comprehensive doctrine for the European Union (EU) to navigate geopolitical poly-crises and re-emerging systemic rivalries. These developments have urged the European Commission to turn from a traditional donor-recipient model to a more assertive and pragmatic pursuit of its geopolitical interest. As projections predict a decline of the EU's global economic weight to just 9% of global

GDP by 2050, it has become apparent that strategic autonomy and global relevance cannot be obtained through isolationism and dependency from major global actors. To safeguard its security, competitiveness, and prosperity, the EU must shift its narrative from "fortress Europe" towards a more inclusive model focused on "mutual resilience", through the establishment of horizontal partnerships with the Global South.

Policy priorities often framed as "domestic" in the public debate, such as climate neutrality, digital transformation, and economic security, are in fact deeply intertwined with the EU's relations in the Global South. A prime example of such policy is the European Green Deal. As the EU targets net-zero emissions for its so-called "clean industrial age" by 2050, vast amounts of critical raw materials (CRMs), such as lithium and cobalt, are crucial for achieving the green transition. The EU itself boasts only tiny reserves of the much-needed CRMs, as the major CRM resources are to be found in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. However, the EU has become heavily reliant on a single producer, China. Today, China provides 98% of all rare earth permanent magnet imports for the EU, highlighting a heavy dependence with high-risk potential. Therefore, it is key for the EU to turn to alternative providers found in the Global South. These alternative providers, however, see the CRMs-trade as their chance to climb up the global value chain, which makes purely extractive relationships impracticable. Hence, the EU must commit to partnerships of horizontal nature, rather than the ones it used to build and maintain in the past.

Failing to craft partnerships that support local added value, through for example the refinement and processing of the CRMs in the source countries and regions, will result in partners turning to competing connectivity options, notably China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and other models such as the ones supported by the BRICS+ group. Accordingly, an inclusive approach to strategic autonomy is not merely a normative choice, but a geostrategic necessity for survival in a changing world order where emerging countries seek agency among a "battle of offers".

The EU's primary tool for operationalising its partnerships is its €300 billion infrastructure investment strategy, titled Global Gateway. Although originally planned to promote the EU's strategic autonomy through diversification of its supply chains, the initiative has come under stern criticism from partners in the Global South. According to critics, the Global Gateway's priorities have often been unilaterally set in Brussels, disregarding input from its partners, which eventually led to a supply- rather than demand-driven approach. Moreover, reports reveal that more than 60% of Global Gateway projects predominantly serve the interests of European companies, rather than local ones.

Consequently, and to remain relevant and competitive with its competing connectivity models, the Global Gateway must become more attractive and transparent for its partners. Inclusive decision-making, which involves communities, civil society, and local leaders in the policy-making processes

from the outset would give the Global Gateway projects a "mutual-benefit" quality it currently lacks. Additionally, assuring investments in digital, energy, and transport infrastructure that provide real socioeconomic benefits to local communities would boost Global Gateway's attractiveness for potential partners while simultaneously refuting accusations of "green colonialism".

Through the "Brussels effect", which sees the adoption of EU standards on data privacy, environment, and safety worldwide, the EU has capitalised on its status as "regulatory superpower". Yet, inclusive cooperation is increasingly perceived as being obstructed by the EU's unilateral impositions of its rules and regulations. EU regulations that have significant external consequences, such as the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) and the Carbon Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) have sparked resentment among the Global South. Policies of the likes of CBAM are repeatedly understood as embargos on industrial production and seen as unjust hurdled erected without prior consultation with impacted parties.

To preserve its global relevance, the EU needs to switch from a regulatory prescription model (vertical) to a co-development (horizontal) model, a model which includes heads of missions of partner countries in active consultations. Furthermore, to boost credibility, sustainability, and trust, proceeds from tools like CBAM should be reinvested into decarbonisation initiatives of partner countries for greater local impact of EU regulations. Going forward, tackling its double-standards will be a crucial element for European legitimacy as a global "regulatory actor".

The "autocratic dilemma" is an additional factor complicating the EU's pursuit for strategic autonomy. To manage its migration flows and energy security, the EU must engage with autocratic regimes, particularly in its Southern neighbourhood. Geopolitical pressures have increasingly urged the EU toward a transactional and issue-based relationships in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). While cooperation with autocrats can in some instances not be avoided, collaboration runs the risk of solidifying their grip on power, embezzlement, and exacerbation of long-term instability in the state or region.

An inclusive strategic autonomy therefore needs a meticulous balance of realpolitik and defence of the EU's values. Reliance on authoritarian stability is detrimental, as regimes built on repression and surveillance have severe legitimacy deficits, making them vulnerable to rapid destabilisation, economic failure, and social unrest, as evidenced by the Arab Uprisings. The very crisis and security risks the EU's strategic autonomy aims to deter, are often the result of states failing into violent conflict. Hence, the authoritarianism the EU partners with today could pose a serious long-term strategic risk to European interests tomorrow.

For the EU's strategic autonomy to be inclusive, it must be tailored to regional realities. Boiled down to MENA this would signify moving away from short-term "stability deals" to arrangements based on mutual resilience,

crucially catering to the necessities of the local population rather than the elites. To this end, Global Gateway should integrate a "do no harm to democracy" principle, which in practice foresees a shift away from a "one size fits all" method to a multi-dimensional analysis of the partner country's fault lines to provide tailored and efficient initiative that serve both the EU's interest and the local population.

As the world order is shifting, multilateralism needs to evolve alongside it. Successfully promoting a reformed multilateralism that mirrors global development towards a multipolar world, which better includes emerging countries from Global South and offers a platform and heard voice in organisations such as the United Nations (UN), the World Bank, and International Monetary Fund (IMF), represents a great opportunity for the EU to have a future leading role in a changing world. The EU should promote a shared understanding of responsibilities with its partners around the globe. To put an inclusive strategic autonomy into action, the EU needs to transcend Eurocentric definitions of security and adopt "mutual resilience".

The EU must leave its "Fortress Europe" dogma behind, instead strategic autonomy should be understood as supporting and reinforcing the independence of the EU and its partners through local capacity-building support. As the EU assists its partners in the Global South and builds sustainable horizontal partnerships, it secures independence from supply chains deemed as risk, while simultaneous driving independence for its partners from systemic rivals.

The EU must acknowledge its partners' agency and hence needs to leave its "green colonialism"-logic behind to focus on joint ventures and technology transfers in order to outcompete with connectivity models of systemic rivals. Through investing in and promoting local processing and refining of CRMs, the EU shall position itself as the reliant facilitating actor for its partners eager to climb up the value chain. Thoroughly applied, this method will equip the EU and partner countries with a multitude of new value chains, again fostering independence from systemic rivals.

Modular and sector-specific agreements with clear economic targets and benefits, inspired by the recent EFTA-India agreement should be focused on since big, comprehensive trade deals are increasingly challenging. These frameworks should concentrate on areas of mutual interest and benefit and be developed in close collaboration with the partner countries to circumvent perceived regulatory imposition and produce solid sustainable partnerships on which future deals can be built on.

If the recommendations above were to be implemented, the EU's over-representation in international organisations would be muted. While it would boost the EU's legitimacy in promoting a more inclusive world order, the implementation of an inclusive strategic autonomy would inevitably lessen its decision-making weight in global governance hubs. It is therefore crucial for the EU to find and speak with one single voice, making the most of one single seat at a table of many.

The European Union stands at a crossroads. On the one side it can follow a narrow, defensive idea of strategic autonomy with an emphasis on protectionism and internal security at the peril of being sidelined and eventually facing global insignificance. On the other, it can pursue a broad, inclusive strategy that recognises the value of sustainable horizontal partnerships that hold mutual benefit. The EU should use its regulatory power and ability to invest to build parts of a new world order that is still based on stable rules, which rewards cooperation with secure and resilient values chains. The EU's role in a changing world will depend on its ability to leverage its values-based model to construct a network of long-lasting global partnerships, a process which will inevitably include a reassessment and rearrangement of the EU's value catalogue.

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