

Master's Degree in International Relations

Chair of China-EU Relations

**The EU's Pursuit of Foreign Policy
Autonomy: Balancing Assertiveness and
Cooperation with China in Ukraine and
the Indo-Pacific**

Supervisor

Silvia Menegazzi

Co-supervisor

Flavia Lucenti

Candidate

Edoardo Talamoni

*“To my family and friends, whose unconditional love and guidance have
been my compass through every high and low”*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	5
CHAPTER 1. THE EU’S QUEST FOR STRATEGIC AUTONOMY: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND SCHOLARLY DEBATES	11
1.1 The Evolution of the EU’s Foreign and Security Policy: An Historical Overview	11
1.2 From Pax Americana to Multipolarity: Transatlantic Growing Divergence in the Age of Sino-American Rivalry	15
1.3 Between Strategic Ambition and Reality: Explaining the EU’s Foreign Policy Gaps.....	21
1.4 Strategic Autonomy in the Literature: A Comparative Dialogue Between European, American, and Chinese Scholarship	24
1.5 Understanding Security Through the Eyes of the Other: A Mutual Perception Analysis of EU–China Relations	34
1.6 Modelling Strategic Autonomy: A Game-Theoretic Perspective.....	37
CHAPTER 2: STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN CHINA-EU RELATIONS: THE EU’S RESPONSES ACROSS MULTIPLE ARENAS	46
2.1 Strategic Autonomy in the EU: A Multidimensional Development.....	46
2.2 China’s Military Rise and the Military Dimension of EU Strategic Autonomy: The Case of Readiness 2030	53
2.3 China’s Belt and Road Initiative and the Geopolitical Dimension of EU Strategic Autonomy: The Case of Global Gateway	64
2.4 EU–China High-Level Strategic Dialogue: “Cooperative” Strategic Autonomy in Security and Geopolitical Affairs	77
2.5 Between Competition and Cooperation in the Economic Dimension of EU Strategic Autonomy: The EU’s De-Risking Approach	80
CHAPTER 3. STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN ACTION: THE EU’S REGION-SPECIFIC SECURITY APPROACHES TOWARD CHINA	89
3.1.1 From Biden to Trump: Evolving American Objectives in the Russo-Ukrainian War.....	89
3.1.2 Securing the Neighborhood: The EU’s Strategic Interests and Measures	92
3.1.3 China’s Response to the War in Ukraine: Between Moscow and the EU.....	99
3.1.4 Naming and Shaming: How the EU Has Reacted to China’s Position on the War.....	108
3.1.5 Beijing’s Peace Initiatives: Form Without Substance?	111
3.2.1 The Indo-Pacific: Origins and Competing Geopolitical Conceptions	112
3.2.2 From FOIPS to FONOP: U.S. Containment Strategy in the Indo-Pacific.....	114
3.2.3 China’s Approach to the Indo-Pacific: Sovereignty and Maritime Security.....	118

3.2.4 Engaging Without Containing: The EU's Alternative Indo-Pacific Paradigm.....	122
3.2.5 The EU-China Partnership Against Piracy: A Cooperation Framework in the Gulf of Aden.	128
3.2.6 Between Beijing and Taipei: The EU's Delicate Balancing Act in the Taiwan Strait.....	131
3.3 A Comparative Analysis: The EU's Varied Security Strategy Towards China in Ukraine and the Indo-Pacific	135
CONCLUSION	141
BIBLIOGRAPHY	146

INTRODUCTION

In early September 2025, President Trump made headlines by demanding that the European Union immediately raise tariffs on Chinese imports from 50% to 100% as a precondition for stronger American pressure on Putin. The message, veiled as a transactional offer, was clear: if Europe wants U.S. engagement in Ukraine, it must align with Washington's broader containment strategy against Beijing. While this announcement was delivered with the bravado that often characterizes Trumpian diplomacy, it nonetheless sent shockwaves through Brussels. Indeed, the episode laid bare a deepening dilemma for the EU. On the one hand, China's growing support for Russia has led to a hardening of the EU's position toward Beijing in its Eastern neighborhood. Yet, on the other hand, Trump's call for a full-scale trade war with China would certainly risk dragging Europe into a zero-sum confrontation that runs counter to its interests and to its emerging approach of strategic differentiation. For EU policymakers, the question is no longer whether to be tough on China, but how to be tough and where. This controversy has thus once again highlighted the fragility of multilateralism, the erosion of international norms, and the structural pressures confronting the European project. The assumptions that once underpinned EU foreign policy such as predictability, rules-based cooperation and transatlantic consensus are rapidly fading. In this landscape, the EU can no longer afford the luxury of ambiguity or passive alignment. Instead, it faces a defining challenge: how to defend its interests and values while navigating an increasingly complex and unstable multipolar order, in which the United States and China compete for global influence and expect others to choose sides. Nowhere is this dilemma more acute than in the EU's evolving security relationship with China. From the battlefields of Ukraine to the shipping lanes of the Indo-Pacific, the EU's China policy has begun to reflect a regionally differentiated logic, one that combines assertiveness and cooperation. Understanding the rationale behind this emerging posture is essential not only to assess the credibility of EU foreign policy, but also to appreciate the contours of a new international order, where power politics and normative pluralism coexist in uneasy tension.

In this context, the central research question guiding this thesis is as follows:

“Why would a more autonomous EU foreign policy lead to regionally differentiated approaches in its security relationship with China?”

The core argument advanced in this thesis is that the EU pursuit of strategic autonomy has enabled the development of a differentiated security posture toward China, assertive in regions of direct security and normative exposure, such as in Ukraine, and cooperative in more peripheral theatres like the Indo-Pacific. Therefore, rather than treating EU–China security relations as monolithic or uniformly confrontational, the thesis unpacks the logics that supports the EU’s emerging ability to tailor its China approach according to regional, strategic, and institutional variables. By examining how the EU calibrates its China policy across different regions, it is also contended that SA functions not only as a partial break from transatlantic consensus, but as a mechanism for asserting European agency in a contested international order.

To investigate the research question, this thesis adopts a qualitative, interpretivist methodology, combining thematic analysis of primary sources with comparative case study research. The empirical foundation of this study rests on an extensive review of primary sources, including official documents from the European External Action Service, the European Commission, the European Council, and the European Parliament, as well as Chinese government white papers, policy and governmental speeches, and official communiqués. These are supplemented by press releases, joint statements, and summit readouts from EU–China bilateral dialogues, as well as resolutions and working papers from international fora such as the United Nations, G7, NATO and ASEAN. Furthermore, to enrich the empirical basis of the analysis, the thesis integrates U.S. government documents and statements that shape the transatlantic security landscape and indirectly influence the EU’s China policy. These include materials from the U.S. Department of State, the National Security Strategy, Congressional reports, and executive statements under both the Biden and Trump administrations. These sources are particularly relevant in examining the evolving triangular dynamic between Washington, Brussels, and Beijing. In parallel, this work is supported by a broad range of secondary sources, including peer-reviewed academic literature on SA, EU–China relations, transatlantic security, and regional order transformation. These qualitative sources are also complemented by quantitative data retrieved from internationally recognized institutions such as the World Bank or the Kiel Institute for the World Economy. This data has been used to track variables such as trade flows, investment trends, military assistance, and sanctions impact, especially in relation to EU–China interdependence and the Union’s material capacity to act in distinct theatres. Nonetheless, the methodological core of this thesis lies in the comparative study conducted in chapter three, where two case studies, Ukraine and the Indo-Pacific, are examined in parallel. The choice of these regions displays their divergent strategic relevance for the EU and their contrasting levels of normative, economic, and military engagement with China. The Ukraine case is explored through the lens of China’s indirect support to Russia and its implications for EU security on its eastern flank.

The Indo-Pacific, by contrast, offers a setting where the EU seeks to assert its global power while avoiding direct confrontation, thus enabling a more collaborative form of engagement with Beijing. Overall, this methodological approach allows for triangulation of data across regions, sources, and institutional actors, enhancing the validity and robustness of the findings. Throughout the thesis, emphasis is placed on maintaining a critical distance from political discourse, ensuring that the analysis remains grounded in empirical evidence and theoretical reflection, rather than echoing normative assumptions or institutional rhetoric.

The question of how the EU calibrates its foreign policy in an increasingly multipolar world has received growing attention in recent years. In particular, the concept of SA has emerged as a key analytical and political framework to understand the EU's evolving international identity. European scholars such as Tocci, Casarini and Bergmann have variously defined SA as the Union's ability to act independently in security and defense matters, free from overreliance on external actors, most notably the United States. While initial debates around SA tended to focus on institutional capabilities and military planning, more recent European scholarships have expanded the concept to encompass broader dimensions such as economic resilience, technological sovereignty, and normative agency. Across the Atlantic, the notion of European SA has become increasingly salient within U.S. academic and strategic circles. Nonetheless, for many U.S. scholars, the question of EU autonomy is directly tied to broader considerations about burden-sharing within NATO and the potential recalibration of American military priorities. Within this discourse, two divergent perspectives have crystallized. On one side, figures like Posen have argued that a more self-reliant Europe would allow the United States to reallocate resources more efficiently without compromising Western security. From this vantage point, greater European responsibility is not only desirable but necessary. On the other side of the debate, scholars such as Meijer and Brooks offer a far more skeptical assessment, thereby contending that structural fragmentation, divergent threat perceptions, and persistent capability gaps continue to inhibit the EU's ability to function as an autonomous security actor. In their view, any premature reduction in U.S. engagement on the continent would expose Europe's vulnerabilities and risk destabilizing the security architecture painstakingly constructed over decades. As shown, while the European and American academic discourse on European SA has become increasingly robust, much of it remains anchored in discussions about Europe's defense posture within NATO and the durability of the transatlantic alliance. As a result, the implications of SA for the EU's external relations beyond the Euro-Atlantic space, particularly vis-à-vis China, have received only limited theoretical attention. Indeed, most studies remain either descriptive in nature, or focused on single policy domains, without systematically analyzing how the EU adapts its security posture across different regions in response to China's global rise. In contrast, Chinese academic literature has approached the subject with greater

analytical depth. Researchers such as Shaohua and Wong view SA not merely as a European aspiration but as a structural development that could recalibrate the EU's global orientation. Their analyses emphasize how an EU less dependent on Washington could emerge as a more stable, pragmatic, and predictable actor, particularly in China's eyes. They highlight how enhanced European agency could foster new avenues for cooperation, from reinforcing multipolar governance structures at the multilateral level, to reducing alignment pressures within the US–EU–China triangle and enabling more interest-driven bilateral engagement with Beijing. This body of work suggests that, while SA is still contested and uneven in practice, it holds considerable promise for reshaping the dynamics of China–EU relations in a world marked by growing geopolitical polarization. Against this backdrop, this thesis seeks to fill a critical gap in the existing literature by examining how and why the EU differentiates its China policy across various security theatres, with a specific focus on Eastern Europe and the Indo-Pacific region. Despite the increasing relevance of China in global security debates, few if any contributions offer a regionally comparative analysis of the EU's security posture towards Beijing. This remains a blind spot in both Western and Chinese academic discourse. Therefore, this work argues that a regionally differentiated approach, catalyzed by strategic autonomy, offers a more accurate and nuanced understanding of the Union's foreign policy behavior. It therefore builds on, but also moves beyond, the existing theoretical frameworks by combining insights from SA theory, rationalist foreign policy analysis, and game-theoretical models of trilateral interaction, notably the EU's role as a third player between U.S.–China tensions. Indeed, this thesis stands out by bridging theoretical abstraction and empirical application by offering an innovative application of game theory that has so far remained unexplored in academic discourse regarding EU–China security relations.

This thesis is structured into three chapters, each of which progressively contributes to unpacking the logic, instruments, and regional applications of the EU's pursuit of SA. The first chapter lays the conceptual and historical groundwork by examining the evolution of the European Union's foreign policy from its origins to the present day. By analyzing the key phases of the EU's external action, it not only highlights its normative aspirations but also persistent structural limitations, ranging from institutional fragmentation and intergovernmental decision-making to capability gaps and divergent national interests. The chapter then situates the emergence of SA in the broader context of shifting global power dynamics, particularly the gradual erosion of U.S. global hegemony and the parallel rise of China as a superpower. This section then proceeds to deepen the growing strategic divergence between Brussels and Washington, especially on issues related to security and multilateral governance. Subsequently, the chapter provides an in-depth review of the academic literature on SA, drawing on three main strands: European scholarship, American analyses

and the Chinese literature. Building on this foundation, the chapter introduces the security dimension of EU–China relations, analyzing mutual perceptions and evolving threat assessments through primary documents and secondary studies. Finally, the chapter develops the theoretical framework used throughout the thesis: drawing on game theory, it models the EU as a rational third actor within a chicken game dynamic between the United States and China, seeking to preserve maneuvering space and avoid entrapment in a zero-sum confrontation, while maximizing its strategic payoff through differentiation and selective engagement. The second chapter explores the concrete policy tools and strategic initiatives through which the EU is operationalizing its commitment to greater autonomy vis-à-vis China. It traces the evolution of the Union’s security and foreign policy toolkit from the 2016 Global Strategy to the more recent Strategic Compass and the institutionalization of economic and technological resilience strategies. Particular attention is given to three flagship instruments: the Readiness 2030 agenda in the field of defense in light of China’s military rise; the Global Gateway initiative as a counterweight to China’s Belt and Road Initiative; and the de-risking agenda, which seeks to recalibrate the EU’s economic exposure to China in critical sectors such as critical raw materials. Rather than treating these instruments in isolation, the chapter demonstrates how they mirror a broader shift from passive integration to proactive strategic differentiation. It stresses the interplay between internal political dynamics, such as the differing preferences of France, Germany, and Eastern European countries, and external pressures from the United States and China. Moreover, it shows how these instruments are applied asymmetrically depending on the policy domain and geopolitical theatre, setting the stage for the comparative analysis that follows. Finally, the third chapter applies the analytical framework developed in chapter one to a comparative examination of two regional theatres where the EU’s China policy has acquired increasing strategic relevance: the war in Ukraine and the Indo-Pacific security environment. The chapter explores how the EU adapts its posture in response to the specific geopolitical, normative, and material conditions of each context. The case study on Ukraine begins by distinguishing the divergent approaches adopted by the Trump and Biden administrations, particularly with respect to deterrence towards Russia and engagement with European allies. It then examines the EU’s unprecedented response to the Russian invasion, encompassing military, economic, humanitarian assistance and financial instruments. Subsequently, the chapter turns to China’s stance throughout the conflict, analyzing its diplomatic rhetoric, strategic alignment with Moscow, and material support, including trade surges and dual-use exports. The analysis underlines how Beijing’s ambiguous posture has triggered a perceptible shift in the EU’s perception of China, leading to a more assertive diplomatic stance and greater economic sanctions on Chinese companies. Finally, the chapter considers the potential, albeit limited, for China to act as a mediator or facilitator in future conflict-resolution scenarios, assessing European

expectations and skepticism regarding this role. The Indo-Pacific section shifts the focus to a theatre where EU–China interaction remains less conflictual. It begins by contrasting U.S. and EU strategic visions for the Indo-Pacific, stressing the EU’s preference for engagement over containment. Against this backdrop, the chapter explores China’s strategic interest in the region and the EU’s nuanced response, which balances normative concerns with pragmatic cooperation. Two focal points are then analyzed in depth: first, anti-piracy cooperation in the Gulf of Aden, which exemplifies a shared operational interest; and second, the EU’s approach to Taiwan, which reflects a strategic balancing act. The EU maintains informal but consistent ties with Taipei while avoiding formal recognition or actions that might provoke Beijing, thereby positioning itself as a cautious yet autonomous actor. The chapter concludes with a comparative analysis of the two cases, showing how the EU’s SA takes on different modalities depending on the geopolitical context: deterrence and distancing in Ukraine, versus engagement and tailored cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

CHAPTER 1. THE EU'S QUEST FOR STRATEGIC AUTONOMY: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND SCHOLARLY DEBATES

1.1 The Evolution of the EU's Foreign and Security Policy: An Historical Overview

The post-war trajectory of European integration has been shaped by a persistent tension between two divergent visions of Europe's future¹. On one side, the integrationist or *communautaire* member states have consistently advocated for deeper supranational cooperation and institutionalized coordination. On the other, intergovernmentalists have prioritized the preservation of national sovereignty and state-centric decision-making. Unlike economic integration, which has gradually become embedded within the EU's institutional architecture, the development of foreign policy has largely followed an intergovernmental path, evolving outside the supranational framework and often reflecting the primacy of national interests.

The history of European foreign policy begins, perhaps tellingly, with a failure. The De Gasperi initiative of 1952 marked the first significant attempt to construct a common foreign policy framework among the member states of the nascent European Community (EC), following the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the EC's foundational institution. Inspired by an integrationist and federalist vision of Europe, the initiative aimed to develop a European Political Community (EPC) that would include a unified foreign policy dimension. This proposal was also closely tied to the concurrent effort to establish a common European defense through the European Defense Community (EDC). However, entrenched resistance to transferring core elements of national sovereignty, combined with domestic political opposition and procedural obstacles, ultimately led to the rejection of the EDC. As a result, the broader De Gasperi initiative was never seriously considered². The collapse of these early efforts had lasting consequences: they effectively excluded "the questions of defense and of a common foreign policy from the formal agenda of European integration"³ until the early 1990s. Following the collapse of the EDC, the

¹David Brannegan and Cathleen S. Fisher, "The Evolution of European Foreign Policy: Intergovernmental versus Integrationist Visions for Europe", *The European Union, Nonproliferation, and Arms Control* (Washington, DC: Stimson Center, 2001), pag. 1, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep10988.6>

²*ivi*, pag. 1-2

³Richard G. Whitman, "The European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy: Achievements and Prospects," *CSD Perspectives*, no. 11 (London: University of Westminster Press, 1996), pag. 3

Treaties of Rome notably omitted any provisions on foreign policy⁴. Nonetheless, a modest but symbolically important step was taken in December 1969 at the Hague Summit, where the six founding members of the ECSC concluded that further progress toward political unification could best be achieved through initiatives operating outside the formal EC framework⁵. This consensus gave rise to the concept of European Political Cooperation (EPC), formally articulated in the Davignon Report⁶. The report institutionalized the principle of consultation on major foreign policy issues, establishing a system of regular meetings among EEC foreign ministers, later extended to include summits of heads of state and government⁷. Lacking agreement on more ambitious proposals, the member states effectively settled on an intergovernmental compromise, rejecting supranational decision-making in favor of preserving national control over foreign policy⁸.

Despite its initially promising outlook and broad support among member states, EPC began to lose momentum during the 1970s and 1980s, raising doubts about its long-term viability. A critical test emerged in 1973, when EPC failed to mount an effective response to the oil crisis triggered by the October War. Throughout the decade, EPC produced few substantive common positions or coordinated actions, largely due to the persistent reluctance of member states to relinquish national sovereignty⁹. Nevertheless, this intergovernmental framework continued to define the character of European foreign policy cooperation throughout the period. Its culmination came with the Single European Act (SEA) of 1986, which, for the first time, provided formal treaty recognition of EPC¹⁰. However, the SEA did not alter the fundamentally intergovernmental nature of the process; rather, it merely codified existing practices without introducing supranational mechanisms or procedural innovations¹¹.

Eventually, the dissolution of the bipolar world order exposed the inadequacies of EPC, which had become increasingly misaligned with the accelerating pace of integration in other areas of European governance¹². More importantly, it proved too limited a mechanism for an EU that was beginning to envision a more assertive and coherent international role: the Gulf War and the outbreak of violence in the former Yugoslavia starkly highlighted these shortcomings.

⁴Federiga Bindi, *European Union Foreign Policy: A Historical Overview*, (Washington D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2012), pag. 14, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/theforeignpolicyoftheeuropeanunion_chapter.pdf

⁵David Brannegan and Cathleen S. Fisher, *op.cit.*, pag. 3

⁶*ibidem*

⁷Federiga Bindi, *op.cit.*, pag. 18-19

⁸David Brannegan and Cathleen S. Fisher, *op.cit.*, pag. 3

⁹*ivi*, pag. 4

¹⁰Federiga Bindi, *op.cit.*, pag. 24

¹¹*ibidem*

¹²David Brannegan and Cathleen S. Fisher, *op.cit.*, pag. 5

The ratification of the Treaty on European Union, better known as the Maastricht Treaty, marked a decisive turning point in the institutional evolution of the EU's external action, as it formally discontinued EPC and introduced its successor: the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The new label, more aligned with the vocabulary of integration, was welcomed by federalist-oriented actors as a sign that the EU was ready to step into a more effective and unified role on the international stage. Such optimism was reinforced by the ambitious language of the Maastricht Treaty itself, which defined the CFSP as covering “all aspects of foreign and security policy^{13/14}.” The treaty set out wide-ranging goals: to uphold the Union's independence, enhance both its own security and that of its member states, and contribute to the maintenance of peace and international stability¹⁵. Importantly, the CFSP framework also broke a longstanding taboo by allowing, for the first time, the inclusion of defense-related matters in the scope of EU-level cooperation, opening the path toward the gradual development of a common defense policy. Nevertheless, these innovations remained constrained by the institutional logic of intergovernmentalism. Strategic priorities under the CFSP were to be determined by the European Council, and operational decisions carried out by the Council of the EU, with both bodies acting by unanimity¹⁶.

The conflicts in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s exposed serious limitations in the institutional design of the CFSP and underscored the EU's inability to respond effectively to crises in its immediate neighborhood¹⁷. In response to these shortcomings, the Treaty of Amsterdam, which entered into force on 1 May 1999, aimed to modestly strengthen the integrationist dimension of the EU's foreign policy apparatus¹⁸. Among the institutional adjustments, the treaty introduced greater procedural flexibility within the Council¹⁹. It allowed for the use of qualified majority voting in certain cases—specifically, after a joint action or common position had already been established—and permitted constructive abstention, enabling one or more member states to abstain from a vote without blocking consensus. However, these innovations proved largely symbolic, as in practice the Council continued to operate by consensus, and formal voting remained rare²⁰. More consequential was the treaty's creation of the office of the High Representative (HR) for CFSP which was designed

¹³David Brannegan and Cathleen S. Fisher, *op.cit.*, pag. 5-8

¹⁴“Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union,” Official Journal of the European Union, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC_1&format=PDF

¹⁵Federiga Bindi, *op.cit.*, pag. 26-28

¹⁶*ibidem*

¹⁷David Brannegan and Cathleen S. Fisher, *op.cit.*, pag. 9

¹⁸*ibidem*

¹⁹Federiga Bindi, *op.cit.*, pag. 34-35

²⁰*ibidem*

to give the Union's external action a more visible and coherent public profile²¹. For the first time, the EU's foreign policy was to be embodied in a single figure who could speak on behalf of the Union.

The Treaty of Lisbon, which entered into force on 1 December 2009, represents the last major constitutional milestone in the evolution of the EU's foreign and security policy architecture²². It emerged as a compromise between the member states and the Union following the 2004 enlargement and the collapse of the Constitutional Treaty project. Among its most distinctive innovations was the creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS), the EU's *de facto* diplomatic corps in order to support the implementation of the CFSP. In the security domain, the Lisbon Treaty introduced a mutual defence clause, enshrined in Article 42(7) TEU, affirming a collective obligation to assist a member state subjected to armed aggression²³. At the same time, it formalized the establishment of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), further elaborating the EU's role in international crisis management²⁴. However, CSDP initially lacked many of the operational and financial instruments required to give it real substance. Indeed, the institutional groundwork laid by Lisbon was gradually complemented by initiatives introduced in subsequent years, such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)²⁵.

Over the years, the EU has made sustained efforts to build a CFSP that is more autonomous, coherent, and effective²⁶. A major impetus in this direction came with the adoption of the European Union Global Strategy (EUGS) in 2016, a strategic document designed to reassess the Union's priorities in light of a rapidly evolving international environment. The need for such a vision became particularly evident as a series of destabilizing events unfolded across and around Europe: the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the wave of terrorist attacks between 2015 and 2017, the migration crisis, Brexit, and the election of Donald Trump. Among the most tangible outcomes of the EUGS was the launch of PESCO, which is arguably the most significant institutional development in EU CFSP in recent years. PESCO introduced a flexible mechanism through which a group of "willing and able" member states could form an advanced core of cooperation in the defence sector. Thus, this initiative strived to foster convergence across national armed forces, promote joint capability development, pool and share military resources, and coordinate logistics and training, thereby

²¹David Brannegan and Cathleen S. Fisher, *op.cit.*, pag. 10

²²Luigi Lonardo, *EU Common Foreign and Security Policy after Lisbon: Between Law and Geopolitics* (Cham: Springer, 2023), pag. 54-57

²³*ibidem*

²⁴Erwin van Veen et al., *Band-Aids, Not Bullets. EU Policies and Interventions in the Syrian and Iraqi Civil Wars* (The Hague, Netherlands: The Clingendael Institute, 2021), pag. 8

²⁵*ibidem*

²⁶Stefania Rutigliano, "Ukraine Conflict's Impact on European Defence and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)," *European Papers*, November 21, 2023, https://www.europeanpapers.eu/europeanforum/ukraine-conflicts-impact-european-defence-and-permanent-structured-cooperation-pesco#_ftn14

addressing the persistent fragmentation of Europe's defence landscape²⁷. Significantly, the EUGS also brought the concept of strategic autonomy (SA) to the fore, marking one of the first instances in which the EU explicitly identified the need to reduce its vulnerability to the political manipulation of interdependencies by external powers²⁸. At that stage, however, the term remained largely aspirational and it was introduced more as a guiding idea than a fully articulated doctrine.

1.2 From Pax Americana to Multipolarity: Transatlantic Growing Divergence in the Age of Sino-American Rivalry

In order to critically contextualize the emergence of the EU's necessity to pursue a more autonomous foreign policy within the broader global landscape, it is essential to consider two major structural determinants that have fundamentally reshaped the international order in which the Union has to assert its strategic agency: the relative decline of U.S. primacy and the concurrent rise of China as a global power. These dynamics, however, have also contributed to a growing transatlantic divergence in key foreign policies and security interests. This divergence, as will be explored in the following analysis, is also crucial to understanding the deeper motivations behind the EU's need to develop a more autonomous foreign policy, one that allows for a regionally differentiated approach to its security relationship with China.

Following the end of the Second World War, the United States took the lead in shaping a new international order grounded in the primacy of law and the principles of international legality, thereby assuming the responsibility of safeguarding global peace and prosperity²⁹. While for many this system may appear as an established and immutable reality, the relative harmony among the world's major powers in the postwar period has long intrigued and even surprised historians accustomed to the protracted and bloody conflicts that had characterized the preceding centuries³⁰. Underpinned by overwhelming military and economic dominance, Washington succeeded in imposing a form of *Pax Americana*, sustained not only by coercive power but also by a formidable cultural influence rooted in the appeal of the American model as a counterweight to the Soviet Union³¹. Equally instrumental

²⁷Stefania Rutigliano, *op.cit.*

²⁸Riccardo Alcaro and Pol Bargués, "The Evolution of EU Foreign and Security Policy Discourse," *Conflict Management and the Future of EU Foreign and Security Policy*, January 14, 2025, pag. 11, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003559467-2>

²⁹Graham Hallison, *Destinati alla guerra*, trans. Michele Zurlo (Roma: Fazi Editore srl, 2018), pag. 12.

³⁰*ibidem*

³¹Christopher Layne, "This Time It's Real: The End of Unipolarity and the Pax Americana", *International Studies Quarterly* 56, no.1 (March 2012): pag. 204-210, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41409832>

in consolidating this leadership were international institutions in which the United States held a preeminent role³². In this context, Washington provided through the Marshall Plan financial resources needed to revive European economies shattered by the war, while simultaneously offering a security umbrella that enabled the continent's social and political recovery³³. This led to a tacit but foundational transatlantic bargain: European states delegated sovereignty over their own security to the United States, which, through NATO and a substantial military presence, entrenched its strategic influence across Western Europe and effectively acquired veto power over key foreign policy decisions. In exchange, European governments were able to focus on building their expansive welfare states, sheltered from the costs and burdens of defence³⁴. From Washington's strategic perspective, maintaining an active U.S. presence in Europe was considered the most effective means of excluding Soviet influence while simultaneously containing German power³⁵. The underlying logic was that, without substantial American engagement, a Germany deemed sufficiently strong to deter the Soviet Union would likely have pursued rearmament and nuclear capabilities, an outcome that could have deeply unsettled France and other European neighbors, thereby endangering the cohesion of the Western alliance. Throughout the Cold War, the United States therefore cultivated a web of alliances that enabled it to shape the European strategic landscape in a manner conducive to counterbalancing Soviet power³⁶. However, this arrangement would come at a strategic cost. The European model of prosperity became structurally dependent on American security guarantees, fostering a culture of strategic complacency and limiting incentives to develop autonomous military and security capabilities³⁷.

Afterwards, the collapse of the Soviet Union ushered in a dramatic transformation of the international system, shifting from a bipolar structure to a unipolar one in which the United States, frequently described by its own senior officials as the "sole remaining superpower", stood uncontested at the apex of global power³⁸. In light of this, it is worth recalling Strange's influential assessment of the United States in this period as a transnational empire capable of exerting "*structural power*" which is control over the key organizing principles of the global system³⁹. According to

³²Christopher Layne, *op.cit.*

³³Jan Techau, *Security Politics in Asia and Europe: The Five Structural Problems of EU Foreign Policy* (Berlin: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2009), pag. 74-76, https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=c5c9140c-20dc-95c5-57d7-146587b20558&groupId=252038

³⁴*ibidem*

³⁵Hugo Meijer and Stephen G. Brooks, "Illusions of Autonomy: Why Europe Cannot Provide for Its Security if the United States Pulls Back", *International Security* 45, no.4 (2021): pag. 7-12, <https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-03393477v1/document>

³⁶*ibidem*

³⁷Jan Techau, *op.cit.*

³⁸Christopher Layne, *op.cit.*

³⁹Franco Mazzei *et.al.*, *manuale di politica internazionale*, (Milano: Egea, 2010), pag. 38-39

Strange, this power extended across four foundational domains: knowledge, through the dominance of U.S.-based media and information networks; finance, via American leadership in global financial regulation; security, through its unparalleled military reach; and production, as expressed in the global influence of its multinational corporations⁴⁰. This unipolar configuration accurately reflected the post–Cold War distribution of capabilities and preserving America’s hegemonic status within this new structure became the overarching strategic aim of every U.S. administration from George H. W. Bush to Obama.

However, in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, the very economic foundations of the *Pax Americana* began to erode, while the ideological and institutional pillars promoting U.S. leadership also experienced significant weakening. Within this context, it is increasingly plausible to contend that the unipolar era has drawn to a close, giving way to a phase that may be described as the “unipolar exit”. This transition is fueled by two principal forces: one internal to the United States and the other external. On the domestic front, the decline stems from a relative if not partially absolute erosion of American economic strength, compounded by a looming fiscal crisis and growing uncertainties surrounding the long-term viability of the U.S. dollar as the dominant global reserve currency. Although rooted in domestic dynamics, these challenges have carried significant international repercussions. The fiscal constraints have compelled the United States to scale back its global strategic posture, particularly by reducing its military commitments in regions deemed non-essential, such as parts of the European continent. Indeed, while the U.S. nuclear umbrella remains in place, Europe’s relevance in Washington’s strategic calculus has diminished. For instance, considering the evolution of U.S. troop deployments in Europe, one observes a significant reduction: in 1995, approximately 118,000 American troops were stationed on the continent, a number that has since been nearly halved, with current figures standing at roughly 65,000 active-duty personnel⁴¹. As such, the sustainability of this transatlantic bargain appears increasingly uncertain. This retrenchment is expected to yield as well two other major outcomes: first, a reduced defense budget will facilitate China’s efforts to narrow the military gap with the United States; second, Washington’s ability to fulfill its traditional role as a regional stabilizer (particularly in Europe and the Middle East) and as a steward of the global commons, will be considerably affected.

Turning to the external dimension, the rise of new great powers constitutes the most compelling evidence of the erosion of unipolarity. The growing consensus that the international system is undergoing a transition toward multipolarity and that U.S. relative power is in decline is

⁴⁰Franco Mazzei, *op.cit.*

⁴¹Hugo Meijer and Stephen G. Brooks, *op.cit.*

now virtually uncontested. China stands as the most prominent illustration of this shift, exemplifying how potential great powers have gradually positioned themselves to challenge American preeminence. For over three decades, beginning with the economic reforms of Deng Xiaoping, China deliberately maintained a low international profile, avoiding direct confrontation with the United States and its regional allies. At the same time, Beijing actively integrated into the liberal international order constructed and dominated by Washington, pursuing modernization through participation in global trade and governance mechanisms. This strategy of a “peaceful rise”, as China itself has termed it, was deeply informed by Deng’s pragmatic doctrine: “Tao guang yang hui”, conceal one’s capabilities and bide one’s time⁴².

To fully grasp the extraordinary magnitude of China’s ascent over the past three to four decades, it is essential to consider a number of illustrative indicators⁴³. Benefiting from prolonged periods of rapid economic growth, China has managed in a remarkably short span of time to transform itself from a largely agrarian and impoverished nation into the world’s foremost manufacturing powerhouse. In doing so, it has defied the predictions and at times the expectations of those who foresaw the collapse of communism and the Chinese regime following the Tiananmen Square crackdown. The Dragon has secured a leading position across a wide array of industrial sectors, ranging from shipbuilding and robotics to infrastructure and telecommunications. Today, China is responsible for the production of approximately one-third of the world’s agricultural output and accounts for half of global industrial goods distribution, achievements all the more striking given the country’s authoritarian political system and its historically prolonged phase of economic stagnation⁴⁴. Further empirical evidence reinforces the scale of this transformation. Between 1990 and 2018, while the United States’ share of global GDP declined slightly, China’s share surged from a mere 1.6% to an impressive 15.8%⁴⁵. During the same period, the number of countries with which China maintains active economic partnerships rose to well over 120. Any assertion that China’s economic success stems solely from the size of its population is readily challenged by its exceptional performance in the field of innovation. According to the World Intellectual Property Organization, the number of patent applications filed by Chinese entities soared from just 276 in 1999 to over 58,000 by 2019, attesting to the central role played by technological advancement in the country’s development

⁴²Christopher Layne, *op.cit.*

⁴³Y. Wen, 2015, “The Making of an Economic Superpower---Unlocking China’s Secret of Rapid Industrialization”, Wen, Y., *The Making of an Economic Superpower---Unlocking China’s Secret of Rapid Industrialization*, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis Working Paper, August, June 15, <https://doi.org/10.20955/wp.2015.006>

⁴⁴*ibidem*

⁴⁵Ian Bremmer, *The Power of Crises: How Three Threats – and Our Response – Will Change the World* (New York: Simon and Schuster, May 17, 2022), pag. 32-33

trajectory⁴⁶. Yet perhaps the most consequential achievement lies in the realm of poverty alleviation. Between 1981 and 2004, an estimated 500 million people were lifted out of extreme poverty, a feat that the World Bank has cited as a benchmark from which Western governments could and should draw valuable lessons⁴⁷.

The prospect of China surpassing the United States as the world's largest economy carries implications that extend well beyond the economic realm: it is, above all, a development of profound geopolitical consequence⁴⁸. Historically, the trajectory of ascending great powers has followed a well-documented pattern, often associated with significant systemic disruption. Despite China's official discourse of a "peaceful rise", the emergence of new great powers has, in most cases, contributed to geopolitical instability. As Layne observes, the almost simultaneous rise of the United States, Germany, and Japan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries played a pivotal role in precipitating two global conflicts. Secondly, as states grow economically, they tend to translate their material gains into enhanced political aspirations and corresponding military capabilities. Although China has not yet reached parity with the United States in terms of military technological sophistication, it is rapidly closing this gap. Third, the historical pattern suggests that rising powers invariably strive for establishing regional hegemony. In this light, the strategic rivalry between Beijing and Washington appears increasingly inevitable, as both actors lay claim to influence over East Asia, a region where the United States has held hegemonic status since the end of World War II but which China increasingly regards as its own natural sphere of influence. Fourth, as their global reach expands, emerging powers inevitably develop economic and political stakes far beyond their immediate neighborhoods. In turn, they invest in the capacity to project power abroad in order to secure and defend these growing interests⁴⁹.

In light of China's ascent and the apparent erosion of American primacy, it has become increasingly evident that the United States has undertaken a strategic recalibration of its global priorities. A decisive moment in this shift was marked by the adoption of the expression "Pivot to Asia", coined by then-Secretary of State Clinton in 2011, to signal Washington's intention to redirect diplomatic, economic, and strategic resources towards the Indo-Pacific region⁵⁰. As Kaplan has argued, the twenty-first century is poised to become a "naval century" for East Asia where China is

⁴⁶Ian Bremmer, *op.cit.*

⁴⁷World Bank, "World Bank Group President Says China Offers Lessons in Helping the World Overcome Poverty", (September 17, 2010), [World Bank Group President Says China Offers Lessons in Helping the World Overcome Poverty](#)

⁴⁸Christopher Layne, *op.cit.*

⁴⁹*ibidem*

⁵⁰Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century", *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>

expected to embark on an unprecedented maritime expansion. Through this resurgence at sea, Beijing seeks not only to enhance its geopolitical reach but also to symbolically redeem itself from the “century of humiliation” inflicted by Western powers⁵¹. In doing so, it presents a formidable strategic challenge to American dominance in the region and in turn unleashes significant consequences for the EU.

Therefore, within this global scenario, a fundamental question emerges: what are the implications for the EU? Considering the growing strategic challenge posed by China to Washington, it has become increasingly apparent across successive U.S. administrations that the EU and the United States do not always share the same security concerns, especially when it comes to China. As a matter of fact, Tocci confirms that the different perspectives on the latter stem from a central premise⁵². For the US, the competition with China exemplifies a geopolitical rivalry whose result will determine the American relative decline. For the EU, there is more a fear of China’s intrusion in European norms and ways of life. Thus, this suggests that even if the US and the EU may find compromises, at the same time their approaches will not always converge⁵³. For example, according to Casarini, the EU has attempted to interact with China in a bilateral way whereas the US has framed its China policy around containment strategies and the bolstering of both military and non-military alliances in East Asia⁵⁴.

Furthermore, it would be effective to investigate the words used by the US and the EU in their China’s policy. In the last week of the first Trump administration, the then-Director of National Intelligence Rattcliffe called China “the greatest threat to America today”⁵⁵. Then, in June 2021, former US Defense Secretary Austin under the Biden Administration published a directive labelling China as the “number one” focal point of the US military⁵⁶. Moreover, at the beginning of October 2021, the CIA issued a statement that referred to the Chinese government as a “key rival”⁵⁷. On the other side, the EU views China sometimes as a “rival”, but also as a “partner” and “competitor”⁵⁸. In conclusion, China is not perceived by most of EU policy makers as an urgent military threat neither a grave enemy, but the perception as will be seen later is more multifaceted.

⁵¹Robert D. Kaplan, “THE SOUTH CHINA SEA IS THE FUTURE OF THE CONFLICT”, *Foreign Policy*, no. 188, (September/October 2011): 78, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41353198>

⁵²Natalie Tocci, *op.cit.*, pag. 15

⁵³*ibidem*

⁵⁴Nicola Casarini, *op.cit.*, pag. 93

⁵⁵“Timeline: U.s.-China Relations,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-china-relations>

⁵⁶Jim Garamone, “Austin Signs Internal Directive to Unify Department’s China Efforts,” *U.S. Department of Defense*, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2651742/austin-signsinternal-directive-to-unify-departments-china-efforts/>

⁵⁷Nicola Casarini, *op.cit.*, pag. 95

⁵⁸“EU-China Relations Factsheet,” *EEAS*, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-chinarelations-factsheet_en

At the same time, as the US has pivoted to Asia, it is possible to claim that *Putin's Russia is viewed more as an anti-American headache than an existential global security threat. Americans do not put Russia on an equal footing with China since Russia is a regional power in decay, whereas China is a global power on the rise*⁵⁹. Nonetheless, this approach contrasts with the EU's one: the Russian invasion of Ukraine nowadays constitutes the most serious threat to European security unlike for the US⁶⁰.

In conclusion, the gradual decline of American hegemony, coupled with the strengthening of China's international influence and the resulting strategic divergence between the EU and the United States, have stressed the need for a more autonomous EU foreign policy, one that is capable of engaging with China through a blend of assertiveness and cooperation tailored to the specificities of each context.

1.3 Between Strategic Ambition and Reality: Explaining the EU's Foreign Policy Gaps

Despite the progressive institutional refinement of the EU's foreign policy framework, closer integration in this field remains constrained. A closer examination of the literature reveals that the Union's underperformance on the international stage stems from a broader set of interconnected factors, including historical, contextual, institutional and socio-political.

Building on the previous discussion, one of the most significant is the post-World War II bargain⁶¹. Its most tangible consequence is the persistent absence of a credible European military capacity which undermines the EU's ability to act as a serious and autonomous foreign policy actor. While the Union does not need expeditionary capabilities, it would require robust defense means to deter external pressure and in order to credibly engage in power politics vis-à-vis actors such as China or Russia⁶².

Two contextual dynamics further complicate the EU's foreign policy performance: multipolar competition and regional fragmentation⁶³. As shown, multipolar competition has emerged as a dynamic in the last decade and it functions both as a catalyst and as a constraint for EU foreign and

⁵⁹"Making Sense of Diverging Security Visions among Global Powers," *Dış Politika Enstitüsü*, June 16, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.org/tr/making-sense-of-diverging-security-visions-among-global-powers/>

⁶⁰*ibidem*

⁶¹Jan Techau, *op.cit.*

⁶²*ibidem*

⁶³Riccardo Alcaro and Hylke Dijkstra, "Re-Imagining EU Foreign and Security Policy in a Complex and Contested World," *The International Spectator* 59, no. 1 (2024): pag. 5-7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2024.2304028>

security policy. In some cases, when the Union itself becomes the target of adversarial strategies, the pressure of external threats can foster SA by promoting greater internal cohesion among member states as will be later illustrated by the EU's relatively unified response to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Nonetheless, in many other instances, multipolar competition significantly complicates coordination efforts with external actors. Member states are frequently compelled to weigh their broader bilateral relationships with great powers which limits their willingness to adopt a common EU position in response to specific crises.

A second external constraint is regional fragmentation, defined as the erosion or collapse of state authority and regional governance structures. This phenomenon has intensified in the post-Arab Spring period, particularly across the EU's southern neighborhood. Fragmentation not only impairs the EU's capacity to produce shared conflict analysis but also obstructs the development of common strategic priorities. Furthermore, it requires the EU and its member states to engage with a diverse range of actors including non-state entities with whom no formal diplomatic channels exist⁶⁴.

Regarding the institutional and strategic dimensions, one of the most evident obstacles is the persistent absence of a unifying mechanism⁶⁵. As previously noted, decision-making in the field of EU foreign policy remains strictly intergovernmental: all initiatives must receive unanimous backing from the member states, while the role of Brussels-based institutions is largely limited to facilitation. This structural limitation constitutes the core deficiency of the EU's foreign policy machinery, namely, its inability to rapidly and effectively combine divergent national preferences into a coherent common position.

Closely related to this is the lack of strategic scope, another deeply rooted impediment. For years, EU political leadership has failed to articulate a shared vision of the Union's global role and the strategic goals it should pursue. Key official documents often lack operational guidance and prioritization, resulting in vague statements rather than actionable policy direction. Much of the responsibility for this strategic inertia lies with the Union's largest member states. Until recently, Germany showed little inclination toward a more assertive and globally oriented foreign policy, often acting as a brake on CFSP development. France, on the other hand, has frequently treated the EU as an extension of its own national ambitions. The consequences of such parochial approaches are not merely theoretical: external powers such as China and Russia continue to exploit internal divisions among EU member states to advance their geopolitical and economic interests⁶⁶.

⁶⁴Riccardo Alcaro and Hylke Dijkstra

⁶⁵Jan Techau, *op.cit.* pag. 76-80

⁶⁶*ibidem*

A final, but no less consequential, challenge in this category is the EU's leadership deficit⁶⁷. Effective leadership is essential to overcoming inertia and addressing the collective action problems that pervade foreign policy coordination. Although the HR and the EEAS manage the daily conduct of EU foreign policy, they seldom undertake bold initiatives without the explicit support of key member states. When this backing is secured, these institutions can assume a more dynamic and influential role but more often than not, such support is absent. In theory, the President of the European Council, as the head of the Union's most influential political body, could provide stronger leadership in this domain. In practice, however, most officeholders have maintained a low profile, restricting their involvement to high-level summits and diplomatic protocol. This fragmented leadership structure severely limits the EU's ability to articulate and pursue a cohesive foreign policy strategy and further compounds the Union's collective action dilemmas⁶⁸.

Finally, a distinct set of socio-political factors further hinders the EU's foreign policy capacity: the increasing internal contestation of the EU's foreign policy and the continent's looming demographic crisis. One persistent challenge is the growing contestation of EU foreign and security policy within member states⁶⁹. For many years, European integration proceeded under a broad consensus that shielded EU affairs from domestic politicization. This "permissive consensus" began to deteriorate after the Maastricht Treaty and was severely tested by events such as the failed referendums on the Constitutional Treaty and the Eurozone crisis. In recent years, this shift has increasingly affected the EU's foreign policy domain, which has come under pressure from rising populist movements and the broader politicization of EU governance. Scholars have described this phenomenon as a process of "de-Europeanisation," whereby national political actors challenge not only policy content but the very legitimacy of common external action⁷⁰.

In parallel, a second socio-political factor is emerging as a strategic constraint with far-reaching implications: Europe's demographic transformation⁷¹. In the medium to long term, the EU is expected to face a significant population decline and a sharp rise in the average age of its citizens. This dual trend will reduce Europe's demographic weight globally, with its share of the world population expected to drop below 8% by 2050. A smaller and older population is likely to weaken economic vitality, slow down innovation, and erode the fiscal capacity required for strategic ambition. Moreover, aging societies are generally less willing to assume political and military risks, further

⁶⁷Stefan Lehne, "Is There Hope for EU Foreign Policy?," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 5, 2017, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2017/12/is-there-hope-for-eu-foreign-policy?lang=en¢er=europe>

⁶⁸*ibidem*

⁶⁹Riccardo Alcaro and Hylke Dijkstra, *op.cit.*, pag. 4-5

⁷⁰*ibidem*

⁷¹Jan Techau, *op.cit.*, pag. 81-82

diminishing the Union's ability to protect and project its interests in an increasingly competitive international environment⁷².

1.4 Strategic Autonomy in the Literature: A Comparative Dialogue Between European, American, and Chinese Scholarship

If now we turn to an examination of how the concept of SA has been addressed in the academic literature, while it has garnered growing attention, the bulk of scholarly literature, especially that produced by European and American authors, has traditionally focused on the implications of SA for the transatlantic relationship. However, the specific effects that a more autonomous EU foreign policy may exert on its relationship with China remain significantly underexplored. As a result, the intersection between SA and EU–China relations constitute a relatively recent and still marginal strand in the broader debate. While some recent works begin to touch upon this dimension, especially in the context of EU hedging strategies between the US and China, these analyses are often fragmented, preliminary, or policy-oriented rather than theoretically structured. Notably, Chinese scholars appear to have developed a more articulated body of work addressing SA and its potential consequences for EU–China relations. Consequentially, great focus will be given to them. Given this asymmetry in the available literature, this section aims not only to provide an overview of the relevant academic contributions produced by European, American, and Chinese scholars, but also to assess (wherever possible) the ramifications of SA in relation to China.

Starting with European literature, one of the most prominent scholars in the field is Tocci who argues that the EU's search for a SA is compounded both by an internal and external component⁷³. According to her, *an autonomous EU is able to live by its laws, rules, norms, values and interests both by protecting these internally and by being a partner to an international order based upon rules it has contributed to shaping*⁷⁴. As a matter of fact, in line with this perspective, Irrera claims that autonomy should not be understood merely as independence from external actors, but more profoundly as the freedom to forge increasingly sophisticated relationships and forms of cooperation⁷⁵. Building again on Tocci's perspective, with regard to the internal dimension, she

⁷²Jan Techau, *op.cit.*,

⁷³Natalie Tocci, rep., *European Strategic Autonomy: What It Is, Why We Need It, How to Achieve It* (Rome, Italy: IAI, 2021): pag. 8-16, <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/9788893681780.pdf>

⁷⁴*ivi*, pag. 9

⁷⁵Daniela Irrera, "Il potenziale dell'autonomia strategica europea", in *Ambizioni e vincoli dell'autonomia strategica europea. Aspetti politici, operativi e industriali* (Rome, Italy: Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2021), pag. 2,

contends that the pursuit of SA is inherently tied to the very essence of the European integration process⁷⁶. The EU was conceived and progressively shaped as a rules-based entity, for which both the safeguarding of internal legal and institutional norms and the advancement of a global rules-based order are of existential importance. Over time, the European project has evolved from a single market into an economic and monetary union, encompassing a common area of freedom, security, and justice, and laying the foundations of a unified foreign policy. Successive crises further propelled integration, leading to the establishment of a banking union and the prospect of a future fiscal union. This incremental yet substantial internal development has rendered the aspiration for SA feasible. Despite its structural limitations in terms of foreign policy capacity, governance, legitimacy, and shared identity, the internal consolidation of the Union has created the necessary conditions for this objective to emerge.

On the external front, she holds that the changing nature of the international system has turned SA from a possibility into a necessity. For most of its history, the EU operated within the liberal international order, which was largely supported by American hegemony and institutionalized through a dense network of norms, regimes, and organizations. However, with the gradual but inevitable shift towards multipolarity, that order is rapidly eroding. Although the United States continues to wield global influence, particularly in the military realm, it no longer enjoys uncontested primacy. This evolving context implies that the EU can no longer depend on the United States as it once did, and must therefore assume greater responsibility, especially within its immediate geopolitical surroundings. In this light, a recalibration of the EU's external posture becomes imperative. Even in the case of a complex actor such as China, whose behavior is at times perceived as a security concern, the Union should seek to identify domains of convergence and mutual interest. While acknowledging that the United States continues to exert considerable influence over EU foreign policy, Tocci maintains that this should not preclude Europeans from pursuing a more balanced set of external relations with China, better aligned with their own strategic interests⁷⁷.

This point is echoed by Casarini, who underlines Washington's attempts to shape the trajectory of EU–China relations in ways that favor American priorities⁷⁸. Consequently, the EU occasionally leans towards reinforcing transatlantic ties, while at other times it strengthens its engagement with

<https://www.parlamento.it/application/xmanager/projects/parlamento/file/repository/affariinternazionali/osservatorio/focus/PI0206.pdf>

⁷⁶Tocci, *op.cit.*

⁷⁷*ibidem*

⁷⁸Nicola Casarini, "A European Strategic 'Third Way?' The European Union between the Traditional Transatlantic Alliance and the Pull of the Chinese Market," *China International Strategy Review* 4, no. 1 (February 9, 2022): pag. 92-101, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42533-022-00095-1>

Beijing, sometimes at the expense of alignment with the United States. A case in point is the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI), which was agreed upon in principle by Brussels and Beijing on 30 December 2020, following seven years and 35 rounds of negotiations. However, this agreement did not mark the conclusion of the process, as it still requires formal signature by both parties and subsequent ratification by the European Parliament (EP). While China portrayed the deal as a major achievement for global trade, and the European Commission framed it as a significant step forward in securing China's commitments on market access, fair competition, and sustainable development, the agreement sparked considerable controversy on the other side of the Atlantic. Indeed, the incoming Biden administration, which had yet to take office at the time, sharply criticized the deal, viewing it as a geopolitical win for Beijing aimed at driving a wedge between the transatlantic partners⁷⁹.

In view of these developments, what should the EU do? Bermann argues that the debate surrounding SA should not be framed in terms of equidistance between great powers, but rather as a form of non-alignment⁸⁰. While the EU, as a union of liberal democracies, undoubtedly shares more normative values with the United States than with China, it does not necessarily share the same strategic interests. Aligning unconditionally with one side, she warns, would ultimately result in increased dependency on that partner. Consequently, EU decisions regarding China should be guided by European interests and assessed on a case-by-case basis. Particularly noteworthy is Bermann's stance on one of the most contentious issues undermining deeper cooperation between the EU and China: the matter of democracy and human rights. In her view, these two concepts must be clearly distinguished. Western states, she contends, must abandon the illusion that regimes they disapprove of can be reformed through coercion or pressure which is a belief that continues to inform much of American foreign policy. China, as an ancient and continental-scale civilization, possesses a deep-rooted sense of historical pride and exhibits strong resistance to perceived external interference, especially from those Western powers responsible for past humiliations. The principle of non-interference in internal affairs therefore remains central to China's diplomatic strategy and it should persuade Western democracies to accept the reality of coexisting with authoritarian regimes. Indeed, such coexistence was once taken for granted during the Cold War, even at moments of heightened ideological tension with the Soviet Union and Maoist China, when cooperation was paradoxically more straightforward. Acknowledging this reality does not entail ignoring human rights abuses in

⁷⁹Nicola Casarini, *op.cit.*

⁸⁰Sylvie Bermann, "European Strategic Autonomy and the US–China Rivalry: Can the EU 'Prefer Not to Choose'?" IAI Istituto Affari Internazionali, pag. 4-10, August 2, 2021, <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/european-strategicautonomy-and-us-china-rivalry-can-eu-prefer-not-choose>

Xinjiang or Hong Kong: this issue, while important, cannot however dominate the entire relationship with China. Instead, Europe should seek a more balanced and pragmatic approach.

Another delicate matter highlighted by Bermann concerns the EU's policy towards the Indo-Pacific region. She questions whether European states should uncritically align with the United States' confrontational stance towards Beijing - such as by issuing threats or deploying naval forces - actions which, in any case, would carry little real military weight. Instead, she considers it more productive for the EU to strengthen partnerships with other regional actors that have long been overlooked by Brussels, such as India, Japan, Australia, South Korea, and the ASEAN countries themselves, which are poised to become major engines of economic growth in the coming decades. Although channels for dialogue have already been established, the reality, she observes, is that during ASEAN-EU meetings ASEAN ministers often voice frustration over the habitual absence of their European counterparts⁸¹. Eventually, as Bermann suggests, *there should be a real triangle and, alongside the famous "Washington Consensus" and "Beijing Consensus", a "Brussels Consensus" that should take decisions based uniquely on its interests and on a just appraisal of the balance of power*⁸².

The debate surrounding SA has extended well beyond the confines of Europe, drawing significant attention across the Atlantic, particularly in the context of United States grand strategy and NATO⁸³. American scholars involved in the ongoing debate on US strategic posture have increasingly engaged with the topic, given that a more autonomous Europe in security matters could enable a redistribution of US resources and strategic focus, most notably toward the Indo-Pacific. Conversely, a Europe that remains dependent on external defense guarantees would require the sustained presence of American military and political commitment on the continent.

Within this scholarly discourse, two primary schools of thought have emerged. The first is an optimistic perspective, particularly prominent in the early stages of the CSDP, when the vision of a more integrated European security architecture appeared more attainable. Proponents of this view took into account the structural and political obstacles facing the EU but nonetheless identified meaningful progress that suggested a positive trajectory. This outlook was also supported by several prominent American scholars advocating for a US policy of restraint, encouraging Europe to assume

⁸¹Sylvie Bermann, *op.cit.*

⁸²*ivi*, pag. 10

⁸³Matteo Mazziotti di Celso and Mattia Sguazzini, "The Road to Strategic Autonomy: Reflections from the Russia-Ukraine War," *De Europa* 7, no. 2 (2024): pag. 110-113, <https://doi.org/10.13135/2611-853X/11424>

greater responsibility for its own security. Posen, for instance, famously asserted in 2006 that *Europe will be reasonably well prepared to go it alone*⁸⁴.

However, over the past decade, this optimism has given way to a more cautious and pessimistic assessment. Scholars such as Meijer and Brooks argue that the challenges the EU must overcome to attain full SA, especially in the short to medium term, are substantial, thereby making the Union unable to act independently of the United States in matters of security. On this basis, they contend that any premature US withdrawal from the continent would leave Europe ill-equipped to safeguard its own security.

Despite their broader disagreements, the divergence between these two positions is most pronounced along two key dimensions. The first relates to threat perception within the EU. Pessimists maintain that one of the foremost impediments to SA is the profound divergence in how EU member states assess security threats. According to Meijer and Brooks, this phenomenon can be termed as "strategic cacophony" which refers to *profound, continent-wide divergences across all the domains of national defence policies, most notably threat perceptions*⁸⁵. In the post-Cold War era, and particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the absence of a unified external threat has led to widely differing national priorities. While some member states place terrorism and instability in the Mediterranean at the top of their security concerns, others perceive Russia and China as principal threats, paying relatively little attention to challenges emanating from the Global South. Conversely, optimists argue that while divergences in national threat assessments do exist, they are not insurmountable. Rather, they believe that the EU itself has the institutional and political potential to harmonize its members' strategic outlooks over time.

The second core divergence concerns the EU's military capabilities. Pessimistic scholars argue that the Union suffers from a considerable shortfall in conventional military capacity and readiness, which fundamentally undermines its ability to operate autonomously. In contrast, the optimistic camp contends that, despite existing deficiencies, the EU possesses the latent potential to rapidly build a credible and autonomous defense policy. For example, they point to the Union's impressive economic base: its combined GDP of approximately \$16 trillion surpasses that of Russia and slightly exceeds that of China which, if mobilized effectively, could be used to overcome many of the obstacles identified by their more skeptical counterparts⁸⁶.

⁸⁴Barry R. Posen, "European Union Security and Defense Policy: Response to Unipolarity?," *Security Studies* 15, no. 2 (July 2006): pag. 153, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410600829356>

⁸⁵Hugo Meijer and Stephen G. Brooks, *op.cit.*

⁸⁶Matteo Mazziotti di Celso and Mattia Sguazzini, *op.cit.*

Chinese academic literature has engaged extensively and in considerable depth with the notion of SA, exploring its meaning, trajectory, future prospects, and broader implications⁸⁷. These analyses typically focus on three core areas: the progress achieved thus far in the development of SA, the constraints hindering its advancement, and the key factors that influence its long-term feasibility. Within this scholarly corpus, one can distinguish three general positions: optimistic, pessimistic, and cautious.

First, several scholars adopt a markedly optimistic stance regarding the achievements thus far, emphasizing the EU's role as a normative power and highlighting its leadership in sectors such as environmental policy, healthcare, science and technology. For instance, Zhang and Fang argue that the EU has succeeded in promoting the diffusion of its governance principles in the Indian Ocean, thereby increasing openness, transparency, and fairness in that geopolitical space. Similarly, Ma contends that the EU's efforts to establish digital sovereignty have inspired other countries to emulate its digital governance frameworks, in turn contributing to the containment of U.S. hegemony in this domain. Jin adds that the EU has displayed notable normative leadership in key global areas such as WTO reform and climate change, at times even surpassing the influence exerted by the United States. Other scholars note the Union's unique capacity as well to formulate and implement global standards in emerging fields like the low-carbon economy, renewable energy, migration, and refugee governance.

Second, however, a more pessimistic outlook prevails among those who point to the mounting challenges facing SA in the current global environment. These scholars bring attention to the growing strategic rivalry between major powers, the fragility of multilateral cooperation, and a series of overlapping crises both within and outside the EU. Zhang, for example, notes that in the post-pandemic era, stagnating economic performance, rising unemployment, and widening fiscal deficits have intensified internal divisions among EU member states, thereby undermining the EU's capacity to project global influence. He also highlights the disruptive impact of the war in Ukraine on the EU's ambitions for autonomy, particularly in the domains of energy, financial governance, and market diversification. In a similar vein, He argues that renewed U.S. strategic engagement in Central and Eastern Europe since 2017 has exacerbated geopolitical competition in the region, further constraining the EU's ability to assert autonomy in matters of security, economic strategy, and normative influence.

⁸⁷Na Yang, "How China Perceives European Strategic Autonomy: Asymmetric Expectations and Pragmatic Engagement", *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 16, no.4 (Winter 2023): pag. 485-488, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poad014>

Third, a cautious perspective emerges from those who consider the prospects for realizing SA highly contingent and uncertain. Scholars such as Fang and Yin underline the structural complexities inherent in the EU's supranational character and the divergence of national interests among its 27 member states. In their view, it remains unclear whether a truly unified and coherent push toward SA is attainable. Additionally, events such as Brexit have revealed the institutional and fiscal fragilities that continue to pose challenges to further integration. This more prudent line of analysis centers on a number of other persistent obstacles: the enduring tension between supranational and national sovereignty; the volatility of the EU's external relations with powers such as China, the United States, and Russia; institutional limitations within the European security architecture; and the enduring deficiencies in the EU's military and financial capabilities, all of which are compounded by unresolved problems in regional governance⁸⁸.

Having explored how Chinese scholars interpret the significance of SA for the EU, it is equally important to examine what it entails for the broader China–EU relationship and for China's strategy toward the EU amid escalating competition with the United States. A number of Chinese academics have begun to address these questions, largely agreeing that SA would be beneficial for China: in light of this, Shaohua offers a particularly systematic analysis of the multilateral, trilateral, and bilateral dimensions involved⁸⁹.

At the multilateral level, SA complements China's vision of a multipolar world order. The EU's increasing openness to the notion of multipolarity, historically associated with realist power politics and contrasted with Europe's liberal emphasis on multilateralism, has been interpreted in China as a significant discursive shift. While the EU traditionally foregrounded multilateralism rooted in norms and institutions, Beijing's preference has leaned toward a multipolar system structured by balances of power. As she notes, the EU's gradual adoption of language aligned with multipolarity suggests a narrowing conceptual gap with China. This evolution is exemplified by Commission President von der Leyen's ambition for a "Geopolitical Commission" and former HR Borrell's call for the EU to adopt the "language of power," both of which are viewed in China as signs that Europe is repositioning itself within a changing global order. Within this framework, Jing similarly contends that Europe's active participation in shaping the emerging world order will lift its international

⁸⁸Na Yang, *op.cit.*

⁸⁹Shaohua Yan, "China and European Strategic Autonomy", in *China and World Politics in Transition* (Cham: Springer, 2023): pag. 185-188, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-27358-2_10

standing and discursive influence⁹⁰. Thus, SA is seen as functionally aligned with China's aspiration to recalibrate global governance through multipolar cooperation.

At the trilateral level, particularly within the China–US–EU triangle, SA is perceived as a means for the EU to maintain strategic balance between Washington and Beijing, thereby easing pressure on China amid great-power rivalry. Historically, the EU's limited capacity to act as a unified international actor has undermined its role in this triangular configuration. While alignment with both the US and China has proven feasible during periods of relative calm, a deterioration in US–China relations places mounting pressure on Brussels to choose sides. From a Chinese perspective, SA offers the EU a pathway to resist binary alignments and craft its own agenda. This is reflected in Borrell's articulation of a "Sinatra Doctrine," whereby Europe seeks to navigate great-power competition according to its own interests. Indeed, while the Biden administration in a EU-US meeting emphasized renewed transatlantic coordination calling, for instance, on the EU to "push back on China together", the lukewarm response from European foreign ministers revealed a desire to preserve strategic flexibility. A more autonomous EU, in this reading, would act not as a subordinate in transatlantic relations but as a co-shaper of the China policy agenda, maintaining dialogue with both powers on its own terms.

Finally, at the bilateral level, SA is expected to enable the EU to formulate a more independent and interest-driven China policy, decoupled from U.S. preferences. For decades, U.S. strategic considerations have indirectly impacted on the contours of EU–China relations. However, the pursuit of SA signals an intention to move beyond this structural dependence. Despite a recent hardening of Brussels' stance toward Beijing on specific issues, Chinese observers note that divergences persist between EU and U.S. threat perceptions and strategic priorities. Most notably, while Washington increasingly frames China as a comprehensive geopolitical and security threat, the EU continues to engage with Beijing as a complex partner, one that is neither a full-fledged adversary nor a benign actor. In trade, for example, the EU rejects the U.S. logic of decoupling, instead pursuing a strategy grounded in reciprocity: therefore, this differentiated approach reflects the EU's normative identity and its attempt to balance values with interests. From a Chinese perspective, this multifaceted stance illustrates how SA could insulate EU–China relations from external disruptions, fostering a more stable and pragmatic bilateral relationship⁹¹.

⁹⁰Jing Huang, "China's Role in the EU's Search for Strategic Autonomy: Nonhegemonic Power Relations during World Order Transition," *China International Strategy Review* 6, no. 2 (2024): pag. 255-256, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42533-024-00174-5>

⁹¹Shaohua Yan, *op.cit.*

Although a more autonomous EU foreign policy clearly holds significant potential for enhancing China–EU relations, it simultaneously introduces a number of tangible and prospective challenges. In current European policy discourse, these challenges appear to coalesce around two primary domains: the protection of economic sovereignty and the aspiration for greater geopolitical influence⁹².

To begin with, Shaohua contends that the EU’s growing emphasis on defending its economic sovereignty could lead to an intensified securitization of its economic and trade relations with China. As geopolitical competition increasingly spills into the economic realm, the EU has come to regard economic sovereignty as a central tenet of its SA agenda, particularly given its considerable regulatory and normative leverage within the Single Market. From Brussels’ perspective, China’s use of economic coercion is increasingly perceived as a threat to the EU’s autonomy and resilience⁹³. Within this same framework, Wong adds that accusations of “overcapacity” in China’s key manufacturing sectors such as electric vehicles and renewable energy have gained significant traction among European stakeholders. While such products offer clear benefits in terms of affordability and availability, European industrial actors increasingly fear structural disadvantage vis-à-vis their Chinese competitors. For many within Europe’s business and policy elite, achieving SA entails securing a level playing field and preserving the long-term viability of the continent’s commercial and industrial base⁹⁴.

Secondly, she further argues that the EU’s emerging geopolitical ambition may exacerbate competitive dynamics with China in the realm of strategic affairs⁹⁵. Historically, the China–EU relationship has been characterized by a relative absence of direct geopolitical confrontation, especially when contrasted with the securitized and adversarial nature of China–US relations. This distinction partly stems from the EU’s self-conception as a normative power with limited military projection in the Indo-Pacific. However, as Brussels increasingly aspires to become a geopolitical actor in its own right, its foreign policy discourse and policies are gradually incorporating hard-power and geostrategic considerations. According to Shaohua, this shift introduces at least one significant complication: the EU has become more attuned to China’s presence in geopolitically sensitive regions raising concerns, for instance, about Chinese influence in the EU’s “near abroad,” particularly in

⁹²Shaohua Yan, *op.cit.*, pag. 189-190

⁹³Brian Wong, “European Strategic Autonomy and the Future of Sino-European Relations,” *China-US Focus*, May 30, 2024, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/finance-economy/european-strategic-autonomy-and-the-future-of-sino-europeanrelations>

⁹⁴Brian Wong, *op.cit.*

⁹⁵Shaohua Yan, *op.cit.*

contexts such as Ukraine⁹⁶. In this regard, Wong emphasizes that many Central and Northern European countries, especially former members of the Soviet bloc, including the Baltic and Nordic states, view Russia's invasion of Ukraine as an existential threat to their own national security⁹⁷. Hence, China's ambivalent stance on the conflict founded on strengthening its economic and energy ties with Moscow while maintaining rhetorical distance from its military aggression has been met with deep skepticism to say at least across much of Europe⁹⁸.

How to engage with a strategically autonomous EU is poised to become a key priority for Chinese diplomacy in the years to come. In this regard, Shaohua and Wong argue that China must develop a renewed strategic approach towards the EU, which should be articulated around five core elements.

First, China should elevate the status of the EU within its foreign policy hierarchy and begin to treat China–EU relations through a long-term strategic lens⁹⁹. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1975, bilateral ties have often been regarded as a “derivative relationship,” forged primarily by the broader dynamics between China, the United States, and the Soviet Union. Although the 2003 designation of a strategic partnership between Beijing and Brussels marked an important step, the EU's limited role as a coherent actor has long fostered a persistent “reality–expectations gap” in their relationship. The EU's ongoing pursuit of SA, despite its incomplete nature, holds the potential to narrow this gap and offers a more stable and predictable framework for long-term bilateral engagement.

Second, China should actively support the EU's aspirations for greater SA and seek to position itself as a constructive partner. From Beijing's perspective, a more autonomous Europe would contribute to the diversification of global power structures, enabling a less unipolar, more multipolar international system aligned with China's strategic preferences.

Third, Chinese policymakers must adopt a cautious approach to ideological divergences with the EU in order to prevent European SA from evolving into a confrontational stance towards China. Acknowledging fundamental normative differences without allowing them to dominate the bilateral agenda will be essential to maintaining a workable and stable relationship¹⁰⁰.

⁹⁶Shaohua Yan, *op.cit.*

⁹⁷Brian Wong, *op.cit.*

⁹⁸*ibidem*

⁹⁹Shaohua Yan, *op.cit.* pag. 190-192

¹⁰⁰*ibidem*

Fourth, on the economic front, Wong suggests that China should pursue “win–win” cooperation with the EU by deepening joint ventures and adopting revenue-sharing models, particularly in key industries such as automotive manufacturing¹⁰¹. German and Spanish car producers, who collectively represent approximately 50% of total EU vehicle output, stand to benefit from greater technological collaboration and expanded market access. At the same time, such partnerships could serve to mitigate European concerns over Chinese industrial over-capacity. Looking ahead, Wong proposes the creation of more structured and triangular economic frameworks involving China, the EU, and Southeast Asian nations. In this envisioned model, Chinese enterprises would supply technological innovation and advanced production capabilities, ASEAN states would serve as manufacturing hubs, and European actors would contribute capital and governance structures, thereby facilitating a mutually beneficial regional economic constellation that avoids zero-sum logic.

Finally, with regard to the war in Ukraine, Wong argues that Beijing must devise a clearer and more proactive strategy. It is both timely and necessary for China to engage with the EU in crafting a roadmap for peace that recognizes and accommodates European security concerns, particularly in relation to Russian aggression. Given the EU’s importance as a principal export destination for Chinese goods, China has a vested interest in preventing further escalation or regional spillover of the conflict. In this context, Chinese officials should pay greater attention to the anxieties of Central and Eastern European countries, which remain acutely sensitive to Russian influence in their neighborhood¹⁰².

1.5 Understanding Security Through the Eyes of the Other: A Mutual Perception Analysis of EU–China Relations

Drawing on the work of Gurol, this section provides a concise analysis of how mutual perceptions between the EU and China have evolved in the security domain¹⁰³. While much of the literature on EU–China relations focuses on policy outputs, few contributions interpret these outputs through the lens of foreign policy as a process of social structuration¹⁰⁴. To fill this gap, the analysis

¹⁰¹Brian Wong, *op.cit.*

¹⁰²*ibidem.*

¹⁰³Julia Gurol, “Framing and Perceptions in EU–China Security Relations,” in *The EU-China Security Paradox: Cooperation Against All Odds?* (Bristol University Press, 2022): pag. 73-76, 78-81, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv269fw09.12>

¹⁰⁴Sebastian Harnisch, “Role Theory and the Study of Chinese Foreign Policy,” in *China’s International Roles: Challenging or Supporting International Order?*, (New York: Routledge, 2016): pag. 5

provided from Gurol draws from official documents including white papers, policy papers as well as anonymized interviews with European and Chinese officials, with the aim of identifying temporal shifts in their reciprocal perceptions on security.

Turning first to China's view of the EU, two divergent interpretations emerge when narrowing the focus to the security dimension. On one hand, some scholars argue that Beijing has viewed the EU as a relevant partner for addressing shared security concerns, such as international terrorism, sustainable development, poverty reduction, and environmental protection, areas explicitly identified in China's 2003 EU Policy Paper. They further contend that relations have gradually improved through the adoption of the European Security Strategy (ESS), the EUGS, expanded dialogue formats, and enhanced EU capabilities following the Lisbon Treaty. These analysts posit that, particularly in the wake of the US's partial retreat from multilateral frameworks, China increasingly sees the EU as a counterpart with whom it must engage on more equal terms in the security realm.

On the other hand, a competing view holds that China's perception of the EU as a meaningful security actor peaked in 2003 and has declined steadily since, due to a series of internal EU crises and recurring European criticism of China's domestic governance. Political obstacles such as the EU's refusal to grant "market economy status" and its maintenance of the arms embargo have also contributed to this cooling. Moreover, the eurozone crisis is seen as having eroded the EU's credibility, accentuating the asymmetry between the two powers, especially as China continued to rise globally.

Taken together, these positions reflect an ambivalent Chinese assessment of the EU, as illustrated in Gurol's graph.

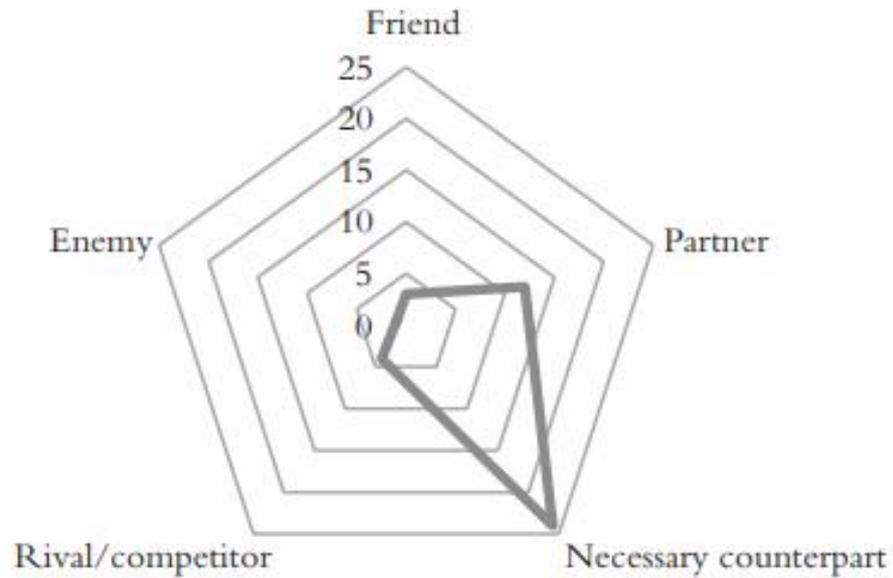


Figure 1. China's perception of the EU in the security realm. Source: Gurol, 2022¹⁰⁵

As it becomes evident, the EU is mainly portrayed as a “counterpart,” occasionally as a “partner,” but rarely as a “friend.”

From the European perspective, more structured efforts to consider China as a possible security interlocutor began with the so-called “European pivot to Asia.” What had initially been a relationship of “constructive engagement” in the mid-1990s evolved into a “comprehensive strategic partnership,” and by 2005–2006, the EU had defined five principles to guide its China policy: deeper engagement, support for greater openness, integration into the global economy, and collaboration for peace and stability. Over time, EU policy discourse expanded to include strategic and security considerations, and formal dialogues on security were institutionalized at a high level. Initially, this shift was driven by the belief that engagement would encourage China to integrate more fully into the multilateral, rules-based order.

Yet over the years, this confidence diminished. By 2005, signs of frustration emerged within EU circles, and ideological divergences became increasingly evident. As a result, the EU shifted from generalized engagement to a more calibrated approach, seeking cooperation in areas of mutual interest while defending its positions more firmly where divergences are irreconcilable. Currently, the EU sees China as a “competitor,” but also as a “counterpart” as illustrated again in Gurol’s graph.

¹⁰⁵Julia Gurol, *op.cit.*, pag. 76

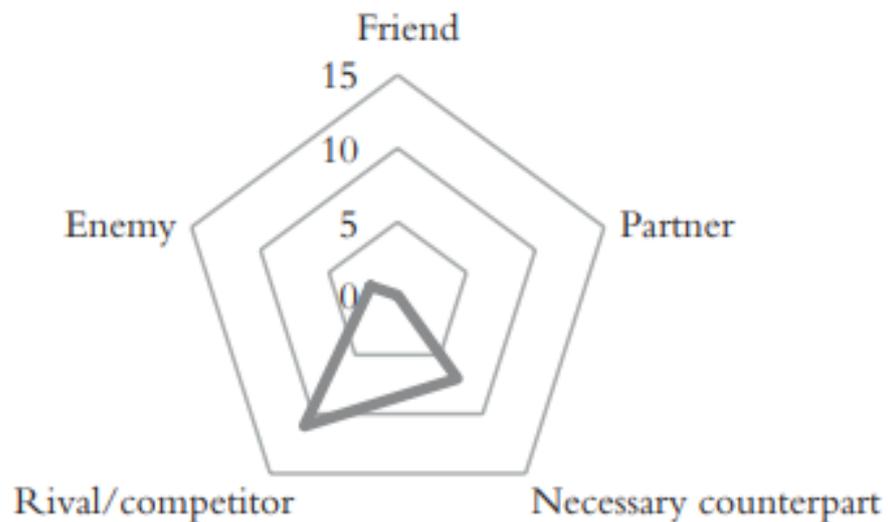


Figure 2. EU's perception of China in the security realm. Source: Gurol, 2022¹⁰⁶

This complex perception requires a delicate balancing act: pursuing cooperation on a sectoral basis where possible, while simultaneously upholding its interests and values¹⁰⁷.

1.6 Modelling Strategic Autonomy: A Game-Theoretic Perspective

Considering the complex dynamics within which the EU's pursuit of SA unfolds, it is necessary to adopt a theoretical framework that adequately reflects and captures such intricacies. To this end, game theory will be adopted as a conceptual framework to analyze EU's SA in a context characterized by great power competition. The application is not intended to be mathematical, but rather interpretative in nature, drawing on the core logic of strategic interaction that underpins game-theoretic reasoning. Therefore, the aspiration is to use this analytical lens to better understand the EU's foreign policy positioning towards China, particularly in regions where interests diverge or converge. Despite the increasing academic and political relevance of the concept of SA, there remains a significant gap in literature regarding its interpretation through the lens of game theory. Indeed, few to no studies have explored EU's strategic behavior as the outcome of interdependent game choices.

¹⁰⁶Julia Gurol, *op.cit.*, pag. 80

¹⁰⁷*ibidem*

Consequentially, this thesis seeks to fill this gap by offering a conceptual application of game theory to model how the EU navigates often conflicting pressures without abandoning its agency or diluting its strategic interests.

As commonly acknowledged, international relations concern the complex interplay among distinct actors such as states, international organizations, and multinational corporations, whose interactions are shaped by interdependent and goal-oriented behaviors¹⁰⁸. Interdependence implies that the capacity of an actor to achieve his objectives is not determined solely by his own choices, but also by the actions of other international actors¹⁰⁹. As a result, this web of interconnections gives rise to strategic dynamics that are often intricate and difficult to decipher¹¹⁰. This suggests that, according to Correa, *game theory, whose objective is the formalized analysis of relationships among two or more actors, can assist international relations theoreticians in explaining the strategic interactions among the actors it considers, and practitioners in the field to influence those interactions to benefit the actors they represent*¹¹¹. Lake and Powell notably argue that the core concern of international relations lies in comprehending the interactive processes themselves, rather than focusing exclusively on the specific content or format of the issues at stake¹¹².

As demonstrated by Poundstone, the intellectual exchange between game theory and international relations dates back to the seminal contribution of von Neumann and Morgenstern's 1944 work, "The Theory of Games and Economic Behavior", widely recognized as the first comprehensive and systematic application of mathematical reasoning to the analysis of social interaction¹¹³. Extending the recognition of the intellectual convergence between game theory and international relations following von Neumann and Morgenstern's, it becomes evident that this synergy has historically gravitated around issues of security and defense. This focus can be partly explained by the fact that the most operationally relevant aspects of their contribution regarded direct confrontations between adversaries, an area of acute relevance during the Cold War context¹¹⁴. While von Neumann's conception of "strategy" has grounded much of the theoretical architecture of game theory, it is Thomas Schelling who is most closely associated with its application to international

¹⁰⁸Héctor Correa, "Game Theory as an Instrument for the Analysis of International Relations", (2001), pag. 1, https://www.ritsumei.ac.jp/ir/isaru/assets/file/journal/14-2_hector.pdf

¹⁰⁹*ivi*, pag. 2

¹¹⁰Anmol Rattan Singh, "Operationalising game theory in international relations: Concepts, modelling and interpretation", *FINS*, September 7, 2022, <https://finsindia.org/operationalising-game-theory-in-international-relations-concepts-modelling-and-nterpretation.html>

¹¹¹Héctor Correa, *op.cit.*, pag. 1

¹¹²David H. Lake and Robert Powell, "International Relations: A Strategic-Choice Approach," in *Strategic Choice and International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), pag. 4

¹¹³Héctor Correa, *op.cit.*, pag. 1

¹¹⁴*ivi*, pag. 4

relations and security studies¹¹⁵. In fact, his 1960 volume “The Strategy of Conflict” established a bridge between abstract modeling and the empirical study of strategic behavior in world politics. Even if game-theoretic approaches are relatively recent in the broader field of international theory, they now offer essential insights for examining competitive and adversarial dynamics among international actors.

Building upon the aforementioned considerations, Bueno de Mesquita outlined in 2002 five principal contributions through which game theory enhances the study of international relations. First, it offers an analytical framework that allows scholars to interpret the underlying motivations behind actors’ behavior. Second, it facilitates the examination of strategic interactions among international actors. Third, it provides a unifying methodological structure that bridges diverse theoretical approaches within the field. Fourth, it enables the accumulation of knowledge by promoting consistency and replicability in research. Fifth, it strengthens methodological awareness in the analysis of decision-making dynamics. Furthermore, given its foundational assumption of international anarchy, game theory sheds light on how different constellations of national interests and political contexts shape patterns of conflict and cooperation on the global stage¹¹⁶.

At the outset, it is essential to clarify that the term “game”, as used in game theory, should not be interpreted as trivial or unserious¹¹⁷. Rather, according to Bennett, it denotes a structured situation in which two or more actors, each acting rationally and pursuing distinct objectives, possess the capacity to influence outcomes. These scenarios pose a particular analytical challenge: no single actor can unilaterally determine the result, as each must account for the potential strategies of the others. It is useful to consider a case in which the optimal decision for actor A depends on the anticipated move of actor B, and vice versa. Once both actors acknowledge this interdependence, A will not only attempt to predict B’s decision but also seek to shape it, fully aware that B is engaged in a similar effort. Even in the absence of direct interaction, their choices are mutually conditioned, ultimately producing an outcome shaped by both parties. These dynamics often give rise to strategic behaviors such as threats, deception, bluffing, and counterbluffing. Yet, this is only part of the picture. In other cases, common interests can also be identified, creating opportunities for cooperation and shared benefits. As such, strategic interaction frequently involves not only competition, but also the pursuit of collaborative advantage, where assurances and constructive commitments play as significant a role as deterrence and coercion.

¹¹⁵Anmol Rattan Singh, *op.cit.*

¹¹⁶*ibidem*

¹¹⁷Peter G. Bennett, “Modelling Decisions in International Relations: Game Theory and Beyond”, *Mershon International Studies Review* 39, no. 1 (1995): pag. 20-21, <https://doi.org/10.2307/222691>

Thus, in its strategic or normal form, a game is composed of several core elements. First, there are two or more players, understood as the decision-making entities involved in the interaction. These players may be individuals, collective bodies such as cabinets, or institutional actors like corporations, states, or international organizations¹¹⁸. Central to the theoretical model is the assumption that each player operates under the principle of rationality and, by extension, possesses clearly defined preferences¹¹⁹. In game-theoretic terms, these preferences are expressed through the abstract concept of “utility”, which serves as a means of ranking subjective welfare outcomes. In other words, utility represents the degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction an actor experiences as a result of a particular event, decision, or course of action¹²⁰. Another foundational concept in game theory is that of “strategy”. As Shubik explains, a strategy can be understood as a comprehensive plan of action that details how an actor intends to behave throughout the game, and which comprises a set of choices designed to yield the most advantageous results across all possible scenarios¹²¹. In practical terms, this means that actors will select the strategy that offers the greatest expected benefit or “payoff” based on their preferences and the range of available options. Furthermore, every combination of choices made by the participants leads to a clearly defined outcome, such as victory, defeat, or stalemate. Eventually, if the structure of the game accurately reflects the underlying real-world dynamics and is logically coherent, it becomes possible to determine equilibrium outcomes. The most prominent among these is the “Nash equilibrium”, which represents a situation in which each actor chooses their optimal strategy in response to the strategies selected by others. In this state, no player has an incentive to unilaterally change their decision, as they are already achieving the best possible outcome given the choices of their counterparts¹²².

Game theory encompasses a wide range of game typologies, which differ according to various parameters such as the presence or absence of communication, the number of iterations (“single-shot” or repeated), or the role of chance alongside deliberate decision-making¹²³. However, the most fundamental distinction relates to the nature of the relationship between the players' objectives. At one end of the spectrum lie games in which players' interests are strictly antagonistic: any advantage gained by one party inevitably corresponds to an equivalent loss for the other. These are referred to as constant-sum games, where the total utility across players remains fixed, typically normalized to

¹¹⁸Peter G. Bennett, *op.cit.*

¹¹⁹Malvina Tema, “BASIC ASSUMPTIONS IN GAME THEORY AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS”, *International Relations Quarterly* 5, no.1 (Spring 2014): pag. 3, <https://scispace.com/pdf/basic-assumptions-in-game-theory-and-international-relations-4iexbo5lqa.pdf>

¹²⁰*ibidem*

¹²¹Anmol Rattan Singh, *op.cit.*

¹²²*ibidem*

¹²³Peter G. Bennett, *op.cit.*, pag. 22

zero, thus taking the form of so-called “zero-sum games”¹²⁴. In contrast, “non-zero-sum” or “variable-sum games” represent strategic situations in which the interests of the players are not strictly opposed¹²⁵. Instead, in such settings mutual gains are possible, allowing for outcomes in which cooperation leads to an overall improvement in the position of both actors.

A straightforward approach to conceptualizing a strategic interaction is to identify the players involved and enumerate the set of strategies available to each. In the case of a two-player game, this is commonly represented using a “matrix”: the actions of the first player define the rows, while those of the second define the columns. Each cell of the matrix contains a pair of numerical values, representing the respective payoffs to both players for each combination of strategies¹²⁶. One of the most widely recognized games is the “prisoner’s dilemma”, frequently employed to illustrate challenges of international cooperation and collective action¹²⁷.

	Not confess	Confess
Not confess	6,6	-3,10
Confess	10,-3	1,1

Figure 3. Prisoner’s dilemma. Source: Tema, 2014¹²⁸

In its classical formulation, the prisoner’s dilemma involves two accomplices who have been apprehended by law enforcement authorities¹²⁹. Lacking sufficient evidence to convict the pair on the main charge, the authorities threaten each with a minor penalty and then proceed to interrogate them separately. Each prisoner is offered a deal: if they confess and implicate the other, they will be released, while the silent partner will receive a harsher sentence. The game is structured such that if

¹²⁴Peter G. Bennett, *op.cit.*

¹²⁵Malvina Tema, *op.cit.*, pag. 2

¹²⁶*ibidem*

¹²⁷Anmol Rattan Singh, *op.cit.*

¹²⁸Malvina Tema, *op.cit.*

¹²⁹*ibidem*

both remain silent, they receive a relatively lenient punishment, represented in utility terms as 6 units each. If one defects while the other remains silent, the defector receives the maximum benefit (10), while the silent accomplice suffers the worst outcome (-3). Should both choose to confess, they each receive a less favorable but equal outcome of 1 unit¹³⁰. This model reveals a fundamental paradox: even though mutual cooperation (i.e., silence) would lead to a collectively superior outcome, the lack of trust and inability to communicate incentivizes both players to defect, fearing unilateral betrayal¹³¹. In the realm of international relations, the prisoner's dilemma exemplifies how individually rational decisions can lead to suboptimal, Pareto-inefficient outcomes. It also underscores the challenges inherent in fostering cooperation among self-interested actors, particularly in anarchic environments characterized by uncertainty and the absence of enforceable guarantees¹³².

Another well-known strategic interaction model in game theory is the “chicken game”, which is often employed to capture dynamics in international relations where actors are entangled in escalating confrontations with the potential for mutual damage¹³³. The core structure of the game reflects a scenario in which both players are on a collision path and must choose whether to yield or to persist, fully aware that mutual intransigence could lead to disastrous consequences for both¹³⁴. The metaphor derives from a popularized contest in which two drivers accelerate towards one another, with the implicit challenge being to avoid the humiliation of being the first to swerve while recognizing that failure to yield by either side results in a catastrophic crash¹³⁵.

¹³⁰Malvina Tema, *op.cit.*, pag. 2-3

¹³¹Deniz Tasci, “GAME THEORY: Importance, Applications and Contributions in International Relations”, *Hacettepe University*, January 27, 2020, pag. 5, file:///C:/Users/HP/Downloads/DenizTasci_21804454.pdf

¹³²*ibidem*

¹³³Anmol Rattan Singh, *op.cit.*

¹³⁴*ibidem*

¹³⁵Peter G. Bennett, *op.cit.*, pag. 23-24

		<u>Kremlin</u>	
		Back down	Stand firm
<u>White House</u>	Back down	3 , 3	2 , 4
	Stand firm	4 , 2	1 , 1

Figure 4. Chicken Game. Source: Bennett, 1995¹³⁶

In the traditional representation of the game, the players, often metaphorically labeled as the White House and the Kremlin, are each faced with a binary choice: to stand firm or to back down¹³⁷. The outcomes of these choices are represented in a payoff matrix with ordinal utility values assigned to each possible scenario, typically ranging from most to least desirable. Crucially, although the two actors hold asymmetrical preferences, the game is not a zero-sum situation: mutual escalation leads to the worst possible result for both, while unilateral retreat allows one party to secure a higher payoff without mutual destruction. From a strategic standpoint, the analysis reveals two stable Nash equilibria: one in which the first actor prevails by standing firm while the second backs down, and vice versa. These equilibria are stable because neither player has an incentive to unilaterally change their strategy given the other's choice. However, due to the structural symmetry of the game, it is impossible to predict *ex ante* which equilibrium will prevail. As such, real-world analogues to the chicken game often involve intense signaling and credibility-building exercises, with each side attempting to demonstrate a higher level of commitment to its chosen course of action in order to coerce the opponent into conceding¹³⁸.

Based on the logic described above, this thesis proposes an original conceptual application of the chicken game to interpret the logic substantiating EU's pursuit of foreign policy autonomy amidst intensifying Sino-American competition. While classical representations of the chicken game involve two primary actors on a path of confrontation where neither wishes to appear weak by backing down,

¹³⁶Peter G. Bennett, *op.cit.*

¹³⁷*ibidem*

¹³⁸*ibidem*

this hypothesis introduces the EU as a third rational actor whose SA enables it to avoid direct entrapment in a binary conflict. Rather than mirroring the posture of the United States or aligning unconditionally with China, the EU appears to engage in a calibrated strategic flexibility, thus maximizing its own utility within a high-stakes geopolitical contest. The figure below illustrates this hypothesis:

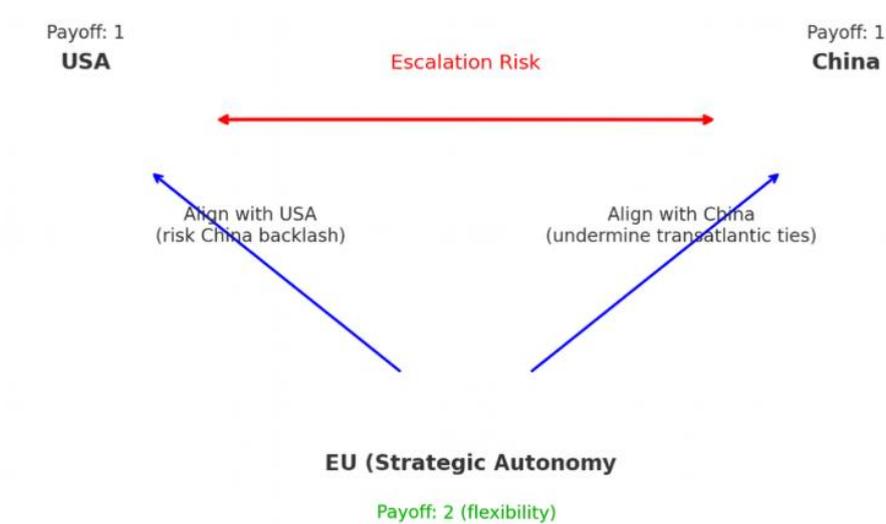


Figure 5. EU's strategic autonomy in the chicken game. Source: Author's own elaboration

The traditional dyadic confrontation is represented by the horizontal red line between the United States and China, each assigned a payoff of 1 in a scenario of mutual deterrence and potential escalation. Indeed, both actors are caught in a pattern of reciprocal signaling and entrenchment, raising the systemic risk of confrontation. In contrast, the EU is positioned beneath the escalation axis, reflecting its peripheral yet consequential role. The blue diagonal vectors depict the EU's potential strategies: siding with the United States would reinforce transatlantic solidarity but carries the cost of potential backlash from China in the form of economic retaliation or diplomatic alienation; conversely, aligning with China risks undermining its credibility within the Western alliance system and weakening the normative foundations of its external action. SA, as illustrated at the bottom of the triangle, represents a third and distinct path: an independent posture that avoids alignment with either

pole. This course enables the EU to maintain greater flexibility and protect its interests without being absorbed into confrontational dynamics it neither initiates nor controls. In this configuration, the EU achieves a higher payoff of 2, relative to the unitary payoffs of the other two actors, precisely because its strategy allows it to balance between assertiveness and cooperation with China. This model therefore supports the argument that the EU, as a rational and interest-driven actor, seeks to modulate its positioning rather than unconditionally conforming to external pressures. In line with this logic, the EU's foreign policy behavior appears to reflect as well differentiated regional strategies in its security approach to China, as it will be explored in the subsequent case studies. In the case of Ukraine, where European security interests are directly and immediately challenged, the EU has adopted a firm position against China, attempting also to steer the United States closer to their strategic priorities. Conversely, in regions such as the Indo-Pacific, the EU has refrained from overtly antagonistic moves against China, preferring instead to pursue dialogue and distancing itself from Washington's more confrontational ideas. By doing so, the EU avoids zero-sum entrapment and preserves its agency in shaping a multipolar order that better aligns with its own interests.

While the application of game theory is valuable to study EU's pursuit of SA, it is equally important to recognize the theoretical limitations that accompany this approach. Despite the substantial conceptual alignment between game theory and international relations regarding the self-interested motivations of actors, one of the principal shortcomings of game theory lies in its disregard for the constraints that shape the set of available choices¹³⁹. As such, game theory does not engage with the underlying determinants that condition the feasibility of strategic options. In particular, it tends to overlook the role of power structures, arguably one of the most crucial variables in international relations, which define and often restrict the range of viable actions for any given actor. This abstraction, while analytically useful, limits the explanatory depth of game-theoretic models when applied to real-world contexts¹⁴⁰. In the case of the EU, this limitation becomes especially salient: as discussed in the previous section, the Union's capacity to pursue autonomous strategic action remains heavily circumscribed by a variety of constraints that complicate the application of idealized rational-choice assumptions.

¹³⁹Héctor Correa, *op.cit.*, pag. 4

¹⁴⁰*ibidem*

CHAPTER 2: STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN CHINA-EU RELATIONS: THE EU'S RESPONSES ACROSS MULTIPLE ARENAS

2.1 Strategic Autonomy in the EU: A Multidimensional Development

In recent years, the concept of SA has become a central tenet of the EU's evolving role in international affairs. Before analyzing the extent to which SA has begun to determine the EU's approach towards China, it is essential to trace the progressive articulation of this notion within the European context, with particular attention to its core dimensions and the successive "waves" through which it has been redefined, as outlined by Helwig and Sinkkonen¹⁴¹.

The emergence of SA within the EU can be traced back to the realms of security and defense¹⁴². Indeed, the earliest official reference to the term appeared in the European Council conclusions on the CSDP of December 2013, which emphasized the need for a *European defense technological and industrial base that could enhance its strategic autonomy and its ability to act with partners*¹⁴³. Notably, in this early articulation, the pursuit of SA was embedded within the more tangible framework of industrial policy, a strategy reminiscent of Jean Monnet's and Robert Schuman's "small steps" approach which prioritized technical cooperation as a means of circumventing the political obstacles impeding deeper European integration¹⁴⁴.

By June 2016, the notion of SA gained significant prominence, embodying a central pillar of the EUGS for Foreign and Security Policy¹⁴⁵. Within this framework, SA was assigned two fundamental roles. Firstly, the EUGS formally identified it as an "ambition" of the Union in the realm of its CFSP, signaling that the terminology had achieved sufficient consensus among member states to be embraced in an unequivocal and cross-cutting manner. Given that the CFSP itself is inherently

¹⁴¹Niklas Helwig and Ville Sinkkonen, "Strategic Autonomy and the EU as a Global Actor: The Evolution, Debate and Theory of a Contested Term," *European Foreign Affairs Review* 27, no. Special Issue (April 1, 2022): pag. 3-8, <https://doi.org/10.54648/eerr2022009>

¹⁴²Mario Damen, "EU Strategic Autonomy 2013-2023 - European Parliament," *EU Strategic Autonomy Monitor*, July 2022, pag. 1-5, [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)

¹⁴³Council of the European Union, "European Council Conclusion (EUCO 217/13)", December 20, 2013, pag. 7, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-217-2013-INIT/en/pdf>

¹⁴⁴Charlotte Beaucillon, "Strategic Autonomy: A New Identity for the EU as a Global Actor," *European Papers*, July 27, 2023, https://www.europeanpapers.eu/europeanforum/strategic-autonomy-new-identity-eu-global-actor#_ftn6

¹⁴⁵"EU Global Strategy (2016) - EEAS - european union", June 2016, https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf.

broad in scope extending well beyond military and security matters, this already suggested an impending expansion of the concept into other policy areas. Secondly, SA was framed as an essential condition for advancing the EU's broader objectives of peace and security¹⁴⁶.

Although the initial use of the concept was marked by vagueness, subsequent clarification was provided by the European Council in a document concerning the implementation of the CFSP. There, SA was eventually qualified as the *ability to act and cooperate in foreign policy with international and regional partners wherever possible, while being able to operate autonomously when and where necessary*¹⁴⁷. In essence, the EU has conceived SA as the ability to define its own priorities and make sovereign decisions in the field of foreign policy, supported by the institutional, political, and material capacities required to implement them, either in coordination with third parties or, if required, unilaterally¹⁴⁸.

A further pivotal moment in the development of SA occurred in 2017, when French President Macron delivered his influential speech at the Sorbonne¹⁴⁹. In his address, Macron framed the contemporary debate on autonomy against the backdrop of a world increasingly distinguished by rising forces of “nationalism, identitarianism, protectionism, and isolationist sovereignty”¹⁵⁰. As a matter of fact, the evolving global context saw the EU weakened by Brexit, forced to renegotiate its trade and security ties with the United Kingdom while simultaneously contending with growing US protectionism and China's expanding economic footprint. The “America First” doctrine promoted by President Trump further strained transatlantic relations, complicating efforts at constructive engagement between the EU and the United States. In this landscape, the terms “geopolitics” and “geo-economics” began to gain renewed traction. Although Macron did not explicitly invoke the term SA, he articulated a clear vision for strengthening Europe's autonomous capabilities in the realm of security and called for the cultivation of a shared strategic culture across the Union¹⁵¹. This growing nexus between SA and geopolitical considerations was further consolidated under the leadership of European Commission President von der Leyen and former HR for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Borrell, both of whom reinforced the urgency of contextualizing SA within the EU's foreign policy framework. For instance, in 2019, von der Leyen declared that the EU should transform into a

¹⁴⁶Charlotte Beaucillon, *op.cit.*

¹⁴⁷Council of the European Union, “Implementation Plan on Security and Defence”, November 12, 2016, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/22460/eugs-implementation-plan-st14392en16.pdf>

¹⁴⁸Barbara Lippert *et.al.*, “European Strategic Autonomy: Actors, Issues, Conflicts of Interests”, *SWP Research Paper* no.4 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, March 2019), pag. 5, <https://doi.org/10.18449/2019RP04>

¹⁴⁹Mario Damen, *op.cit.*

¹⁵⁰“President Macron Gives Speech on New Initiative for Europe,” *Elysee*, September 26, 2017, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2017/09/26/president-macron-gives-speech-on-new-initiative-for-europe>

¹⁵¹Mario Damen, *op.cit.*

“geopolitical force” to assert greater independence in international affairs¹⁵². Similarly, Borrell repeatedly underlined the need for the EU to adopt a “language of power” to maximize its influence on the global stage¹⁵³.

By 2019, however, the scope of SA significantly broadened beyond its initial focus on security, defense, and geopolitical agency¹⁵⁴. Increasingly, it began to encompass other critical domains such as economic resilience, energy security, and the international role of the euro. While economic considerations are now routinely integrated into contemporary analyses of EU SA, the inclusion of the euro’s global role remains a more delicate matter largely due to the enduring dominance of the US dollar in the international monetary system and the euro’s persistent structural reliance on the American financial architecture¹⁵⁵. In this context, the European Policy Center observed as early as 2019 that SA had come to rest on three foundational pillars: not only security and defense, but also the economy and technology given that *advancing strategic autonomy effectively requires not only focusing on distinct areas but also on their interconnections*¹⁵⁶. Regarding the economic dimension, it contended that a robust economic foundation constitutes the bedrock of international power and influence, as it ensures both material capabilities and normative appeal. The EU’s Single Market and Economic and Monetary Union were thus identified as essential sources of strategic depth in the context of intensifying geo-economic competition, and their further consolidation (including the bolstering of the euro’s international role) was seen as imperative. In relation to technology, it asserted that the EU would be unable to credibly advance toward SA unless it positioned itself at the forefront of technological innovation and regulatory leadership, particularly in emergent fields such as AI¹⁵⁷.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic further expanded the spectrum of EU SA by starkly exposing the vulnerabilities of global supply chains¹⁵⁸. The crisis vividly demonstrated the extent to which EU member states had become reliant on the importation of essential goods from Asia, particularly from China. While this dependency was initially noted by the shortage of face masks, it soon became apparent across other critical sectors, including medical and pharmaceutical supplies, semiconductors, and raw materials. In response, Borrell and then-Commissioner for the Internal

¹⁵²Calle Håkansson, “Von Der Leyen’s Geopolitical Commission: Vindicated by Events?,” *Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies* (March 2024): pag. 2,

https://doi.org/https://www.sieps.se/globalassets/publikationer/2024/2024_7cpa.pdf

¹⁵³Joseph Borrell, “Embracing Europe’s Power”, *EEAS*, February 10, 2020,

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/embracing-europe%E2%80%99s-power_und_en

¹⁵⁴Mario Damen, *op.cit.*

¹⁵⁵*ibidem*

¹⁵⁶Giovanni Grevi, “Strategic autonomy for European choices: The key to Europe’s shaping power”, *European Policy Centre*, 19 July 2019, pag. 3

¹⁵⁷*ibidem*

¹⁵⁸Mario Damen, *op.cit.*

Market Breton published a joint op-ed in June 2020 advocating for “a united, resilient and sovereign Europe,” explicitly linking the disruptions caused by the pandemic to the importance of bolstering European resilience and autonomy¹⁵⁹⁻¹⁶⁰. Subsequently, Borrell also framed SA as a process of political survival: since power gaps are shrinking, the world will become more transactional and all powers, including Europe, will tend to be more transactional too. This is an unescapable truth¹⁶¹.

In this light, 2020 heralded a new shift in the SA discourse toward the idea of relocating certain production capacities back to Europe¹⁶². This suggested the emergence of a phase of “de-globalization,” partially reversing decades of economic globalization. However, such ambitions were later tempered by the recognition that reshoring would entail substantial costs and risk undermining the efficiency gains generated by intricate global value chains. As a result, efforts to reconfigure supply chains were deemed justifiable only in sectors of critical strategic importance, such as the pharmaceutical and semiconductor industries.

At this stage, even those member states that had previously expressed reservations about EU SA began to engage more actively in the debate, particularly focusing on the importance of reconciling an open economic framework with a targeted reduction of strategic dependencies. A notable contribution in this regard was the joint non-paper issued by Spain and the Netherlands, which explicitly advocated for a model of SA compatible with the principles of an open economy. This change in discourse culminated in the formal adoption of the term “open strategic autonomy” (OSA), which turned to represent a central feature of the European Commission’s Trade Policy Review released in February 2021¹⁶³⁻¹⁶⁴. Hence, as expected, the scope and application of SA within the EU’s institutional narrative have significantly extended far beyond traditional hard security concerns¹⁶⁵. Indeed, the concept has been progressively incorporated into a wide range of market-oriented policy areas, including the Common Commercial Policy. It has also entered the standard vocabulary of key EU institutions such as the EP, the European Economic and Social Committee, and several national governments. At its core, OSA seeks to strike a balance between the EU’s ability to assert its political agency and the preservation of an open, rules-based market system¹⁶⁶. Within this framework, the

¹⁵⁹Josep Borrell and Thierry Breton, “For a United, Resilient and Sovereign Europe (with Thierry Breton),” *EEAS*, June 8, 2020, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/united-resilient-and-sovereign-europe-thierry-breton_und_en.

¹⁶⁰Mario Damen, *op.cit.*

¹⁶¹Josep Borrell, “Why European Strategic Autonomy Matters,” *EEAS*, December 3, 2020, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/why-european-strategic-autonomy-matters_en

¹⁶²Mario Damen, *op.cit.*

¹⁶³*ibidem*

¹⁶⁴“Trade Policy Review - An Open, Sustainable and Assertive Trade Policy,” *European Commission*, February 18, 2021, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A52021DC0066>

¹⁶⁵Charlotte Beaucillon, *op.cit.*

¹⁶⁶Charlotte Beaucillon, *op.cit.*

European Commission has begun to implement a diverse set of economic policy tools and institutional reforms aimed at enhancing the EU's capacity and that of its member states to manage interdependence with the rest of the world more effectively¹⁶⁷. The reference to SA underscores the EU's intention to avoid excessive reliance on non-EU actors, particularly when such dependencies could constrain its ability to formulate and carry out autonomous policy choices. The addition of the adjective "open" serves a strategic communicative function, bolstering the EU's enduring commitment to economic liberalism and the multilateral, rules-based order. It is also intended to dismiss concerns that SA might imply a turn toward isolationism or economic self-sufficiency¹⁶⁸. In practical terms, this approach has led the EU to pursue trade diversification strategies, particularly in securing access to critical raw materials from allied or like-minded countries while simultaneously equipping itself with new instruments designed to address the vulnerabilities of globalization¹⁶⁹. Among these tools is the "Anti-Coercion Instrument" (ACI), which reflects a more assertive stance aimed at defending EU interests in an increasingly transactional global environment¹⁷⁰.

Ultimately, the outbreak of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine brought the discussion on SA back to the foreground of geopolitical urgency, reasserting the imperative for concrete and operational responses, an aspect that will be examined in greater detail in the subsequent chapter. The publication of the Strategic Compass in 2022 distinctively signaled another critical juncture in this evolution: the document stressed the necessity for the EU to advance a more autonomous foreign policy in light of an increasingly unstable international landscape, shaped both by the intensification of the U.S.–China confrontation and by Russia's destabilizing actions in Europe¹⁷¹. As a result, the concept of SA once again became closely associated with security imperatives.

Nevertheless, the concept of SA remains far from uncontroversial¹⁷². Within the domain of security and defence, it continues to be contested. Notably, Baltic and Central European member states have expressed concern about the implications of a more self-reliant Europe, especially with regard to the potential weakening of transatlantic ties. Poland, for instance, has long feared that the development of an independent and robust European defence capability might inadvertently erode the foundations of NATO and reduce the United States' willingness to remain actively engaged in the

¹⁶⁷Jens Hillebrand Poh, "Open strategic autonomy and the new geoeconomics: consequences for EU trade policy", November 2022, pag. 2, <https://iit.adelaide.edu.au/ua/media/2102/iit-pb18-open-strategic-autonomy-final-v2.pdf>

¹⁶⁸*ibidem*

¹⁶⁹Federico Steinberg, "Open Strategic Autonomy: Illusion or Reality?," *ISPI*, June 6, 2024, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/open-strategic-autonomy-illusion-or-reality-175757>

¹⁷⁰*ibidem*

¹⁷¹"A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence," *EEAS*, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-1_en

¹⁷²Niklas Helwig and Ville Sinkkonen, *op.cit.*

continent's security. For these countries, whose primary strategic concern lies in deterring Russian aggression, it is crucial to avoid sending signals to Washington that may suggest a drift away from the transatlantic alliance. In stark contrast, France has consistently positioned itself as a strong advocate for SA, emphasizing the need to endow the EU with the necessary political will and material capabilities to conduct autonomous operations when required.

Turning to the economic dimension, debates around the EU's approach to managing interdependence are framed under the label of OSA as noted above. Here too, divisions among member states persist. Critics from economically liberal and free-trade-oriented countries such as the Nordic states stress the importance of the "open" aspect of the formula and have voiced concerns over the risk of rising protectionism and growing state interventionism at the EU level as a means to compete globally. Among the most skeptical are also export-driven liberal economies like Germany, whose industrial ecosystems rely heavily on small and medium-sized enterprises that would be disproportionately affected by new trade barriers or a distortion of single market competition in favor of large corporations. Conversely, other Member States, particularly from Central and Eastern Europe, tend to focus more on the need to reduce the Union's economic dependency and to diversify critical supply chains from external powers, especially China¹⁷³.

In conclusion, to envision the multifaceted nature of EU SA, Maslow's hierarchy of needs may offer an interesting analytical lens¹⁷⁴.

¹⁷³Niklas Helwig and Ville Sinkkonen, *op.cit.*

¹⁷⁴Mario Damen, *op.cit.*

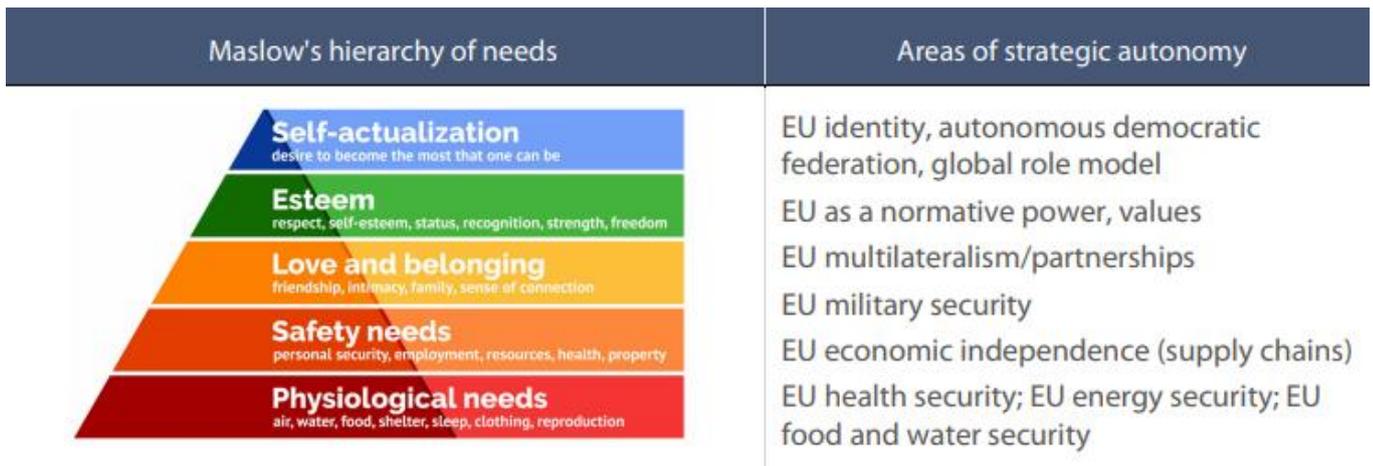


Figure 6. Strategic autonomy compared to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Source: Damen, 2022¹⁷⁵

To illustrate the progressive expansion of domains encompassed by the concept of EU SA, Maslow's hierarchy of human needs offers a compelling albeit metaphorical framework. While any analogy between the psychological needs of individuals and the policy imperatives of states must be approached with caution, the mapping of EU-SA-related policy areas onto the hierarchical structure proposed by Maslow reveals a noteworthy trend: most aspects of SA still appear to correspond to the foundational tiers of the pyramid, addressing essential needs and core interests. For instance, issues such as military security and economic independence relate directly to the physiological and safety needs that form the base of the hierarchy. At a higher level, the EU's commitment to partnerships and multilateral engagement may be associated with the so-called "love and belonging needs," reflecting the relational dimension of international cooperation. Moving upward, the "esteem needs" may be interpreted in geopolitical terms, referring to the Union's global status, the projection of its normative identity, and the diffusion of its foundational values such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Finally, Maslow's apex, "self-actualization", may be analogously understood as the realization of a EU that is not only fully autonomous in its policy-making capacity, but also one in which citizens actively embrace and internalize a shared European identity¹⁷⁶.

¹⁷⁵Mario Damen, *op.cit.*, pag. 5

¹⁷⁶Mario Damen, *op.cit.*

2.2 China's Military Rise and the Military Dimension of EU Strategic Autonomy: The Case of Readiness 2030

As discussed in the preceding section, if SA was once a relatively narrow debate concerning the adequacy of the EU's military capabilities in securing its defense, now it has evolved into a considerably more complex and multidimensional discourse¹⁷⁷. The intensification of great power competition, most notably between the United States and China, has confronted the EU with a series of intertwined challenges that transcend the traditional separation between the security and economic domains. In this context, the EU has gradually begun to articulate more autonomous responses vis-à-vis China which are characterized by growing resolve yet still allowing space for dialogue and cooperation¹⁷⁸.

The first challenge has been represented by the trajectory of China's military expansion, which has also become a defining element of the Sino-American rivalry. In December of last year, the U.S. Department of Defense published its annual "China Military Power Report", a comprehensive 182-page assessment mandated by Congress since 2000 and widely recognized as the most authoritative unclassified source on the development of the People's Liberation Army (PLA)¹⁷⁹⁻¹⁸⁰. The latest edition revised upward its estimate of China's real defense expenditure, officially the second largest in the world, placing it between \$330 and \$450 billion, or approximately one-and-a-half to twice the publicly reported budget. While the report devoted space to ongoing concerns about endemic corruption within the PLA, it cautioned against allowing such issues to obscure the significant progress that China has made in establishing a sophisticated and modern military force, one capable of posing strategic risks not only to the United States, but also to its global network of allies and partners. The continued campaign against internal corruption, now over a decade into Xi's leadership, is in fact indicative of the Chinese president's resolve to build a military apparatus that can credibly support his strategic ambitions¹⁸¹.

Xi has repeatedly framed the establishment of a "world-class military" as a cornerstone of China's "national rejuvenation", a goal set for 2049 and central to his political programme since

¹⁷⁷Niklas Helwig and Ville Sinkkonen, *op.cit.*

¹⁷⁸*ibidem*

¹⁷⁹David Sacks, "Six Takeaways from the Pentagon's Report on China's Military," *Council on Foreign Relations*, December 20, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/six-takeaways-pentagons-report-chinas-military>

¹⁸⁰U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2024: Annual Report to Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Secretary of Defense, December 2024), <https://media.defense.gov/2024/Dec/18/2003615520/-1/-1/0/MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA-2024.PDF>

¹⁸¹David Sacks, *op.cit.*

assuming the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012¹⁸². A major milestone in this trajectory came in 2015, when Xi launched the most far-reaching reform of the PLA since the 1950s. This restructuring replaced the former seven military regions with five integrated theatre commands, it adopted a joint operational structure closely modelled on that of the United States, and created a Joint Staff Department (JSD) to oversee multi-domain coordination. Among the new branches introduced were the PLA Rocket Force, responsible for nuclear and conventional missile forces, and the Strategic Support Force (SSF), charged with developing capabilities in the domains of space, cyber, and electronic warfare.

A further organizational shift occurred in April 2024 with the dissolution of the Strategic Support Force (SSF) and the establishment of the Information Support Force (ISF), a transformation that goes beyond mere nomenclature. Indeed, the move reflects a deeper reorientation of the PLA's strategic doctrine towards the enhancement of its information and cyber warfare capabilities, which the Chinese leadership identifies as critical variables in modern conflict scenarios. These capacities are not viewed as standalone assets, but rather as integral components of a tightly coordinated operational architecture that spans the four main branches of the PLA: the army, navy, air force, and rocket force¹⁸³.

Several key insights can be drawn from the report¹⁸⁴. First and foremost, the document highlights the continued acceleration of China's nuclear modernization programme, which appears aimed at securing greater leverage over escalation dynamics in the event of a conflict with the United States. The report estimates that China now possesses more than 600 operational nuclear warheads (an increase from 500 in the previous year) and projects this figure to exceed 1,000 by 2030, with further expansion anticipated beyond that horizon. In addition to enlarging the size of its nuclear arsenal, China is concurrently upgrading all three components of its nuclear triad. This includes the construction of three new missile fields, housing a total of 320 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) silos, and the development of next-generation, more survivable ICBM platforms. Complementary advancements encompass the deployment of ballistic missile submarines on deterrent patrols, continued operationalization of nuclear-capable bombers, and reported consideration of a rail-mobile launch system. Furthermore, China is actively pursuing cutting-edge delivery technologies, such as fractional orbital bombardment systems and hypersonic glide vehicles, technologies that have already placed Beijing at the forefront of global hypersonic missile

¹⁸²Aleksandra Tirziu, "China's Military: A Global Power Shift," *GIS Reports*, March 14, 2025, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/china-military-expansion/>

¹⁸³Aleksandra Tirziu, *op.cit.*

¹⁸⁴David Sacks, *op.cit.*

capabilities. The PLA is also moving toward the adoption of a “launch on warning” (LOW) doctrine, or what it terms an “early warning counterstrike,” whereby the detection of an incoming missile would trigger a retaliatory strike before the enemy’s warhead could detonate. This evolution underlines the report’s more sobering conclusion: that China’s force modernization trajectory appears to be designed to significantly increase its capacity to inflict devastating levels of nuclear damage upon any adversary.

Second, the report observes steady improvements in the overall readiness and operational proficiency of China’s armed forces. The People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), in particular, is noted for maintaining a high state of readiness across its surface fleet, with a focus on ensuring rapid deployment capacity in response to regional crises. At the same time, the People’s Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) has undergone institutional reforms intended to foster a modern and professional military structure, mainly through the adoption of training programs based on “actual combat conditions”, scenarios specifically designed to replicate the operational challenges of real-world conflict. Similarly, the People’s Liberation Army Ground Force (PLAA) has continued to refine its doctrine and standards for combined arms training, thereby upgrading the coherence and effectiveness of its tactical units.

Third, Beijing is making tangible investments to transform the PLA into a globally deployable military force. The report details China's concerted efforts to establish a network of overseas logistical hubs and military bases, with former US Assistant Secretary of Defense Ratner noting that the Chinese government is actively exploring opportunities to expand its military footprint worldwide, showing considerable flexibility in the selection of potential host countries¹⁸⁵.

Fourth, particular emphasis has been placed by President Xi on elevating China’s maritime capabilities, which are seen as indispensable to his broader vision of national rejuvenation¹⁸⁶. Drawing inspiration from centuries of naval dominance by Western powers such as the United States and the United Kingdom (dominance that underpinned their global influence and control over critical maritime corridors), Beijing seeks to emulate a comparable posture. Until recently, the PLAN comprised 370 operational platforms, including major surface combatants, amphibious vessels, submarines, aircraft carriers, mine warfare assets, and auxiliary support ships. This number is projected to rise to 395 by this year and to 435 by 2030. In contrast, the U.S. Navy, currently operating 296 battle-force ships, is expected to slightly reduce its fleet to 294. Just to draw a comparison, the Royal Navy, the largest in Europe after Russia, maintains a fleet of only 45 ships. These quantitative

¹⁸⁵David Sacks, *op.cit.*

¹⁸⁶Aleksandra Tirziu, *op.cit.*

disparities are further accentuated by China's strategy of military-civil fusion, under which civilian maritime assets can be requisitioned for military use. China's fishing fleet, the largest in the world at an estimated 500,000 vessels, includes around 3,000 ships that operate as part of the so-called distant-water fleet. This blurred distinction between civilian and military maritime infrastructure complicates efforts to assess the full extent of China's power projection capacity, given that virtually any asset within its system can be repurposed for defense-related objectives¹⁸⁷.

Finally, at the heart of China's broader military modernization lies the military-civil fusion (MCF) strategy, a defining feature of its integrated national security doctrine¹⁸⁸. In practical terms, this fusion enables the Chinese state to draw upon technological innovation from civilian sectors and incorporate it directly into military applications. Academic institutions, private enterprises, and research centers, often unaware of the extent to which their output is channeled into defense, are instrumentalized to advance capabilities in high-priority fields such as AI, quantum computing, and aerospace¹⁸⁹.

Within this context, Beijing's military ascent carries significant and increasingly urgent implications for European security as well¹⁹⁰. Although much of China's military expansion has focused on asserting control over its surrounding maritime zones, making it appear geographically distant from Europe's immediate security concerns, such a perception risks underestimating the scope and reach of this transformation. Direct consequences are already conceivable. For instance, a hypothetical Chinese assault on Taiwan followed by U.S. intervention could inadvertently draw European states into a high-stakes conflict, regardless of their intentions. Even if such a worst-case scenario were to be avoided, Chinese military assets such as frigates, destroyers, and cruisers are projected to operate increasingly within operational range of European naval forces and strategic infrastructure in the near future¹⁹¹.

Yet beyond these direct implications, a series of broader strategic consequences is already materializing on the European continent¹⁹². In early 2025, for example, Serbia became the first European country to deploy a Chinese-manufactured FK-3 surface-to-air missile systems on its territory, an episode that illustrates how China's technological advances are beginning to alter the

¹⁸⁷Aleksandra Tirziu, *op.cit.*

¹⁸⁸Emanuele Rossi, "The Pentagon Report: China's Military Rise and Its Implications for the West," *chinaobservers*, February 19, 2025, <https://chinaobservers.eu/the-pentagon-report-chinas-military-rise-and-its-implications-for-the-west/>
¹⁸⁹*ibidem*

¹⁹⁰Joris Teer *et.al.*, "The Consequences and Implications for European Security and Policy" in *China's Military Rise: Implications for European Security* (The Hague: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, November 2021), pag. 105-108, <https://hcsc.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Chinas-Military-Rise-Chapter6.pdf>.

¹⁹¹*ibidem*

¹⁹²Emanuele Rossi, *op.cit.*

military landscape not only in Asia but also in the EU's immediate periphery. Prior to this, Serbia had already procured CH-92 unmanned aerial vehicles from China, thereby positioning itself (once again) as the only European country operating Chinese-manufactured drones¹⁹³. This evolving partnership gained further prominence following the unprecedented joint military exercises held in July 2025, during which Serbia became the first EU candidate country to engage in formal drills with the Chinese armed forces¹⁹⁴. Indeed, according to the Chinese Ministry of National Defense, the “Peacekeeper 2025” exercise, conducted in Hebei Province in northern China, involved special operations units from both militaries¹⁹⁵.

Moreover, China's deepening partnership with Russia adds further complexity to its military strategy and compounds existing concerns¹⁹⁶. Although this cooperation is not without its tensions, it includes joint military drills, arms transfers, and potential intelligence-sharing arrangements, components of what appears to be a concerted effort to counterbalance Western influence. According to the U.S. Department of Defense, Beijing and Moscow have significantly intensified their joint training programs, employing their capacity to operate jointly across multiple strategic domains, including missile defense, cyber operations, and electronic warfare. Over the past two years alone, the two countries have carried out more than twenty joint exercises in critical regions, underlining a growing interoperability that mirrors NATO-style integration. These maneuvers have not only reinforced bilateral operational coherence across naval, aerial, and cyber dimensions but have also served as a testing ground for advanced Chinese military technologies¹⁹⁷.

Therefore, considering China's growing influence in Europe's neighborhood and the continued political and material support for Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, these developments have understandably generated mounting concern within the EU. They have also contributed to a renewed sense of urgency among European policymakers, prompting the adoption of more coordinated security measures, most notably the “Readiness 2030” initiative. While not explicitly framed against China, the agenda must be interpreted against the backdrop of a rapidly deteriorating international order such as the weakening of transatlantic security guarantees as demonstrated in the previous chapter and the increasingly interconnected nature of threats. Within

¹⁹³Andreea Brinza et al., *EU–China Relations: De-risking or De-coupling – The Future of the EU Strategy towards China*, EPRS Study, Directorate-General for External Policies of the Union, European Parliament, March 2024 (PE 754.446), pag. 53,

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2024/754446/EXPO_STU\(2024\)754446_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2024/754446/EXPO_STU(2024)754446_EN.pdf)

¹⁹⁴Ljudmila Cvetkovic, “Planned Serbia-China Military Exercise Sparks EU Backlash,” *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, July 18, 2025, <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-china-military-exercises-eu-alarm-russia/33476628.html>

¹⁹⁵*ibidem*

¹⁹⁶Emanuele Rossi, *op.cit.*

¹⁹⁷*ibidem*.

such a volatile environment, the initiative represents the EU's most ambitious attempt to strengthen its capacity for autonomous action and to ensure its ability to respond effectively to a broad spectrum of security challenges.

As a preliminary observation, a key leitmotif running throughout the plan is the notion of SA, understood as the Union's capacity to act independently in the pursuit and protection of its own interests¹⁹⁸. The document candidly recognizes the geopolitical shift currently underway in Washington, where growing attention is being redirected towards Asia and domestic concerns¹⁹⁹. As the report explicitly warns, Europe can no longer take for granted the stability and permanence of the traditional transatlantic security architecture. This assessment is echoed by Kubičius, the EU's first Defense Commissioner, who starkly observed that *450 million EU citizens should not have to depend on 340 million Americans to defend themselves*²⁰⁰.

While Readiness 2030 has emerged in the context of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the White Paper on European Defense Readiness 2030 does not overlook the growing strategic implications of China's military rise²⁰¹. Notably, it states that China's military expansion is "similarly in nature like Russia," and that *the challenge posed by China is systematic in that it is based on an entirely different – authoritarian and non-democratic – system of government to that of the EU*²⁰². The text goes on to acknowledge that *while China is a key trading partner for the EU, it is increasing defense spending, with a lack of transparency around its military build-up*²⁰³. *It now has the second highest military spending in the world, surpassing all other East Asian countries combined. It is rapidly expanding its military capabilities, including nuclear, space and cyber capabilities, and its growing military projection is therefore raising concerns among European partners*²⁰⁴. In light of this, the White Paper concludes that *in a harsher world of hyper-competitive and transactional geopolitics, reaching across different theatres, the EU needs to be able to effectively counter any challenge and be ready*²⁰⁵. These formulations make clear that although China is not identified as an overt enemy, the systemic nature of its political model, the scale and opacity of its

¹⁹⁸Transatlantic Task Force, "European Defence Readiness 2030: A New Blueprint for Strategic Autonomy," *Beyond the Horizon ISSG*, March 25, 2025, <https://behorizon.org/european-defence-readiness-2030-a-new-blueprint-for-strategic-autonomy/>

¹⁹⁹European Commission, *White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030* (Brussels: European Commission, March 2024), pag. 2-21, https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6d5db69-e0ab-4bec-9dc0-3867b4373019_en.

²⁰⁰Transatlantic Task Force, *op.cit.*

²⁰¹European Commission, *op.cit.*, pag. 2

²⁰²*ibidem*

²⁰³*ivi*, pag. 5

²⁰⁴*ibidem*

²⁰⁵*ibidem*

military modernization, and its expanding global footprint are seen as additional factors necessitating enhanced preparedness and coordination on the part of the EU²⁰⁶.

At the core of the Readiness 2030 thus lies a bold and far-reaching initiative devised to significantly scale up both defense spending and military cooperation across the EU²⁰⁷. The plan outlines a sustained and comprehensive investment effort as well intended to address longstanding capability gaps and to construct a credible and autonomous deterrent posture. Despite a remarkable upward trend in military budgets since 2022, culminating in EU defense expenditure surpassing €100 billion in 2024, (nearly doubling its 2021 levels), Europe still lags substantially behind the United States in absolute terms and, in recent years, has fallen behind China in key areas of military preparedness and spending. To address this imbalance, the initiative has articulated a multi-pronged approach designed to close the existing capability and investment gap. One of its principal pillars is the establishment of a loan mechanism under the Security and Action for Europe (SAFE) instrument, which envisages up to €150 billion in EU-backed financial support to facilitate joint procurement of defense equipment among member states. This mechanism is specifically structured to incentivize intra-European arms purchases, thereby strengthening the EU's own industrial base. Non-EU suppliers, such as firms based in the United States or the United Kingdom, are permitted only if their respective governments sign formal agreements guaranteeing security of supply. In this way, the strategy aims not merely to step up military readiness, but also to consolidate European technological and industrial sovereignty in the defense sector.

In parallel, the plan addresses the structural budgetary disincentives that have long constrained national defense spending. To this end, the Commission has advocated for a coordinated activation of the Stability and Growth Pact's escape clause specifically for defense-related expenditures. This would allow member states to temporarily deviate from their fiscal targets in proportion to the additional defense investments undertaken, unlocking potentially up to 1.5% of GDP (an estimated €800 billion over four years) without breaching EU budgetary rules. Such a measure reflects a fundamental shift in the Union's political priorities, signaling a willingness to place security imperatives above fiscal rigidity.

Furthermore, Readiness 2030 has placed a strong emphasis on joint procurement and strategic planning²⁰⁸. The Commission has already expressed its readiness to serve as a central purchasing authority, either through the European Defense Agency (EDA) or other institutional mechanisms,

²⁰⁶Transatlantic Task Force, *op.cit.*

²⁰⁷*ibidem*

²⁰⁸*ibidem*

should member states request such coordination. The White Paper contends that collaborative procurement offers the most effective pathway for acquiring both large volumes of essential material such as ammunition and missile stockpiles and sophisticated, high-technology platforms. By pooling demand at the EU level, member states can also benefit from economies of scale, reduce per-unit costs, and ensure technical interoperability from the design phase onward. In this context, the initiative also has introduced the notion of “Defense Projects of Common European Interest”, a concept inspired by major joint industrial ventures, intended to support the development of strategic capabilities, such as integrated air defense systems through targeted EU funding. If successfully implemented, these measures could drastically reduce duplication and inefficiencies within the Union’s 27 national armed forces, thereby channeling newly mobilized resources into a more coherent and integrated European security architecture.

Nonetheless, European leaders have increasingly acknowledged that military credibility rests not solely on budgetary allocations but also on the capacity to produce and deploy military equipment at scale and with appropriate speed. This recognition is explicitly addressed in the report which calls for the implementation of an “Ammunition Plan 2.0” aimed at establishing strategic reserves of ammunition, missiles, and essential components, alongside a substantial expansion of industrial capacity to ensure timely replenishment. In this regard, Defense Commissioner Kubilius identified the “massive production of what [Europe] already makes, such as conventional ammunition” as one of the top priorities. In alignment with this goal, several governments have already begun funding new manufacturing facilities and supply chains to boost the output of key munitions, ranging from 155mm artillery shells to portable missile systems. For example, in early 2025, Finland had announced the construction of a €200 million TNT production plant to address a critical shortage in explosive materials, an initiative considered of major importance for improving Europe’s munitions manufacturing capability.

However, as already shown, expanding production capacity alone is insufficient if underlying structural weaknesses in Europe’s defense-industrial base are not remedied. A recent assessment, known as the Draghi Report, revealed that Europe’s defense manufacturing sector remains highly fragmented, with close to 80% of procurement spending directed outside the EU primarily to suppliers in the United States. Such external dependency is increasingly seen as incompatible with the ambition to build a resilient and autonomous European defense ecosystem²⁰⁹. In response, Readiness 2030 White Paper has proposed measures to stimulate a shift toward intra-European procurement, thereby advocating for the establishment of an EU-wide defense equipment market and recommending that

²⁰⁹Transatlantic Task Force, *op.cit.*

member states be encouraged—and, where possible, incentivized—to source at least 65% of their defense acquisitions from European or associated suppliers. This shift would not only channel demand toward the continent’s industrial base, thereby fostering the expansion of production lines, but would also exert pressure on domestic firms to improve the quality, cost-efficiency, and timeliness of their output in order to remain competitive. While the plan preserves the option for governments to procure non-European equipment when it offers clear advantages in performance, speed, or price, the overarching objective is clear: to reduce Europe’s dependence on American suppliers and to capitalize on the potential of its single market to strengthen a robust European defense technological and industrial base.

Another critical obstacle to the desired industrial expansion is the issue of financing and access to investment. Smaller defense firms, in particular, face significant difficulties in securing capital due to stringent regulatory constraints and the reluctance of investors, who are often deterred by reputational risks and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) considerations. Despite this, the plan addresses this constraint with a two-faced financial strategy. First, the European Investment Bank (EIB) is expected to double its defense-related investments to €2 billion annually, while simultaneously relaxing the criteria used to assess projects involving advanced technologies such as drones, space infrastructure, cyber capabilities, and other military applications. Second, the Commission is taking steps to clarify that sustainable finance regulations do not preclude investment in the defense sector. By unlocking private capital, the fifth pillar of the initiative, the EU then hopes to mobilize the vast resources of its financial sector to spur defense innovation and industrial expansion.

Yet increasing production is only one part of the equation; ensuring that these defense outputs can be delivered where and when needed is equally crucial. For this reason, Readiness 2030 strategy highlights military mobility as another critical enabler of European security. In fact, military mobility entails the development of a seamless network of land, air, and maritime transport corridors and support services capable of facilitating the swift movement of troops and equipment across EU territory and beyond. Strategic infrastructure projects, such as expanding rail capacity, widening roads, and enhancing the throughput of military cargo at ports and airfields, are being co-financed through EU instruments like the “Connecting Europe Facility” (CEF). Additionally, the strategy prioritizes the simplification of cross-border procedures and regulatory frameworks that currently hinder the rapid deployment of military units. If fully implemented by 2030, these reforms will result in a far more integrated and responsive defense mobility network²¹⁰. For instance, it would be possible

²¹⁰Transatlantic Task Force, *op.cit.*

to transport a tank battalion from Germany to the Baltic states or Romania with unprecedented speed, or to deploy an EU battlegroup to a crisis zone within days rather than weeks. In this way, Readiness 2030 not only addresses the material and financial dimensions of security but also seeks to bolster the Union's responsiveness in an increasingly unstable global environment.

The ambitious vision delineated raises an inevitable question: can it realistically be implemented? Skeptics remain cautious, pointing to long-standing issues that have plagued European security policy, namely, the persistent difficulty in converting strategic declarations into concrete outcomes. One of the key challenges in this regard lies in gaining the necessary political will and ensuring intra-EU cohesion. As previously discussed, long-standing divergences among member states continue to surface. For instance, France's strong advocacy for "buying European" has clashed with Poland's preference for procuring American equipment. However, as demonstrated above, Readiness 2030 has attempted to reconcile these conflicting preferences by offering incentives for European procurement without enforcing a blanket prohibition on acquisitions from non-EU suppliers. In the long run, should European industries succeed in developing high-quality and interoperable defense systems, such as the Franco-Italian SAMP/T missile defense system or the next-generation German tank initiative, this could organically reduce the reliance on non-European systems. Ideally, by the end of the decade, the EU will not only possess the independent capabilities required to respond autonomously to crises but will also function as a reliable first responder within the NATO framework, with the United States assuming more of a potential supporting role rather than remaining the principal guarantor of European security.

From a financial perspective, the EU's proposed measures certainly tackle key budgetary concerns. However, they do not fully resolve the institutional inertia and structural fragmentation that have historically hampered progress in defense cooperation. As emphasized by the Niinistö Report, insufficient collaboration among member states has led to inefficiencies, duplication of effort, and inflated costs. Overcoming these entrenched obstacles will require a deeper willingness among national governments to relinquish a degree of sovereignty, genuinely embrace joint procurement mechanisms, and move beyond the outdated model of supporting exclusive national champions for every military capability. While the White Paper's focus on common procurement is undoubtedly appropriate, its practical implementation may nonetheless be hindered by protectionist pressures from domestic industries or persistent mistrust among member states²¹¹.

²¹¹Transatlantic Task Force, *op.cit.*

Further concerns have been raised regarding the feasibility of scaling up Europe's defense industrial base within the limited timeframe envisioned by the Readiness 2030 agenda. Defense production capacities cannot be rapidly doubled without long-term investment commitments and predictability in procurement. Although the EU is seeking to provide precisely these conditions through coordinated financial instruments and industrial incentives, additional obstacles remain. Industry experts point to shortages in skilled labor, dependency on non-European supply chains, and regulatory constraints as significant bottlenecks. Moreover, environmental regulations and ESG standards, while necessary in other contexts, may inadvertently impede defense manufacturing. If stringent environmental norms render steel or chemical production prohibitively expensive, the development of critical defense infrastructure will inevitably suffer. The initiative to revise the EIB's investment criteria and clarify the compatibility of defense projects with sustainable finance frameworks represents a positive step forward. Nevertheless, member states must also recalibrate their own regulatory environments, for instance, by facilitating 24/7 factory operations and expediting approval processes for industrial expansion.

Finally, one must consider the inherent unpredictability of domestic political dynamics. A shift in government in any key member state could undermine the momentum of security integration or obstruct EU-level coordination. Although recent support from 19 of the 27 EU member states for increased EIB defense funding reflects a broad political consensus, the success of the plan ultimately depends on maintaining public support. Policymakers must therefore frame increased defense spending not as a path toward militarization, but as a prudent investment in collective security and crisis resilience. Especially in times of economic uncertainty, clear and transparent communication regarding the tangible benefits of such spending will be essential in ensuring both legitimacy and continuity of the Readiness 2030 strategy²¹².

In conclusion, if successfully implemented, Readiness 2030 could represent a decisive step in the EU's pursuit of genuine SA, by progressively transforming the Union from a dependent actor into a more credible and assertive security provider on its own continent. This is particularly relevant vis-à-vis China, whose military rise, though not immediately directed at Europe, nonetheless generates direct and indirect implications for core European security interests.

²¹²Transatlantic Task Force, *op.cit.*

2.3 China's Belt and Road Initiative and the Geopolitical Dimension of EU Strategic Autonomy: The Case of Global Gateway

As with several other initiatives introduced under the leadership of Commission President von der Leyen to foster the EU's geopolitical ambitions, the 2021 Joint Communication unveiling the Global Gateway (GG) made no explicit reference to China²¹³. Nonetheless, to most observers, the initiative was (and continues to be) widely perceived as a direct attempt to offer a geopolitical alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As a matter of fact, commentators have consistently framed GG as a higher-quality, more transparent, and value-based approach to global connectivity²¹⁴. Against this backdrop, the present section begins by outlining the evolution and rationale of the BRI, before turning to the EU's geopolitical response through the GG. While particular attention is paid to regions of direct competition, such as Sub-Saharan Africa and the EU's eastern neighborhood, the analysis also considers an area like Western Asia, where complementarity and constructive engagement is plausible. In this light, the GG can be considered as a case of a regional differentiated approach of SA that blends assertiveness with cooperative outreach, in contrast to initiatives like Readiness 2030, which reflects a more exclusively assertive (albeit defensive) posture.

The BRI was officially inaugurated by President Xi in 2013 during a speech on China's Central Asia strategy at Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan²¹⁵⁻²¹⁶. Symbolically framed as a revival of the ancient Silk Road, the initiative signaled China's aspiration to reclaim a position of centrality in global affairs, echoing its historical prominence in East Asia and beyond. Presented as a vast infrastructure program to facilitate trade between China and Europe, Africa, and the rest of Asia, the BRI was originally known as "One Belt One Road" (yi dai yi lu). The terminology, in particular, mirrors its dual structure: the "belt" refers to overland routes composed of highways, railways, and in some instances, oil and gas pipelines connecting China with Europe via Central Asia, Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and Pakistan; the "road," by contrast, designates the maritime component, comprising port construction and renovation to enhance shipping connectivity across

²¹³Gwennaëlle Joret and Patrick Costello, "Global Gateway and China's Belt and Road Initiative - Fighting the Last War?," *European Democracy Hub*, January 7, 2025, <https://europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/global-gateway-and-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-fighting-the-last-war/>

²¹⁴*ibidem*

²¹⁵Pietro Masina, *Challenging the Belt and Road Initiative: The American and European Alternatives* (Florence: European University Institute, 2022), pag. 11, <https://cadmus.eui.eu/server/api/core/bitstreams/d4ae1228-f7b2-5580-b4ff-7088ebebef02/content>

²¹⁶Jiao Wu and Yunbi Zhang, "Xi Proposes a 'new Silk Road' with Central Asia," *chinadaily*, September 8, 2013, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013xivisitcenterasia/2013-09/08/content_16952228.htm

Asia, Africa, and Europe²¹⁷. Through this maritime expansive architecture, China seeks to establish an alternative global logistics network centered around Beijing, thus reducing its overdependence on critical chokepoints like the Strait of Malacca, long regarded as a strategic vulnerability²¹⁸. Over time, the BRI has evolved well beyond its original scope, progressively incorporating new sectors in response to the shifting priorities of both China and its partner countries. These now include investment in extractive industries, the production and trade of commodities, urban infrastructure, airports, and oil refineries. The geographical footprint of the initiative has also expanded significantly, with Latin America now added among its target regions.

Despite this, at the core of the BRI lies the promotion of what Chinese official discourse describes as a “community of shared future”, a concept previously articulated in Beijing’s foreign policy through the “Community of Common Destiny” (CCD), particularly in reference to China’s neighbors²¹⁹. In an increasingly interconnected and globalized world, the BRI then aims to deliver global public goods irrespective of the recipient countries’ level of development. Indeed, according to a December 2023 report by the Chinese Green Finance & Development Center, the initiative has engaged between 146 and 151 participating countries and has mobilized more than one trillion USD in total investments, 634 billion USD in construction contracts and 419 billion USD in non-financial ventures^{220,221}.

However, to gain a deeper understanding of the BRI, it is necessary to examine the underlying motivations that have shaped its development. One line of interpretation has viewed the BRI as a strategic response by China to perceived containment efforts by the United States, positioning the initiative as a geopolitical counterweight to frameworks such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Within this reading, the BRI thus serves as a mechanism through which China aims to establish its own network of influence and connectivity, independent from Western-dominated institutions²²².

An alternative, yet complementary, perspective emphasizes the project’s economic rationale, highlighting how it reflects three core priorities typically associated with rapidly developing

²¹⁷Pietro Masina, *op.cit.*

²¹⁸Valeria Tabelli, *The Middle Corridor: Where the EU’s Global Gateway Meets the Belt and Road Initiative: What Potential for Complementarity?* (Bruxelles: European Institute for Asian Studies, October 2024), pag. 6-8, <https://eias.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/The-Middle-Corridor-Where-The-EUs-Global-Gateway-Meets-the-Belt-and-Road-Initiative.pdf>

²¹⁹Jacob Mardell, “The ‘Community of Common Destiny’ in Xi Jinping’s New Era,” *The Diplomat*, October 25, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/10/the-community-of-common-destiny-in-xi-jinpings-new-era/>

²²⁰Green Finance & Development Center, “Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)”, <https://greenfdc.org/countries-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative-bri/>

²²¹Christoph Wang, “Christoph Nedopil Wang,” *Green Finance & Development Center*, July 17, 2025, <https://greenfdc.org/china-belt-and-road-initiative-bri-investment-report-2023/>

²²²Valeria Tabelli, *op.cit.*

economies²²³. First, the BRI supports China's effort to secure access to vital commodities, ranging from food supplies to strategic resources such as lithium and cobalt. Second, it pursues to expand overseas markets for Chinese exports, thereby sustaining domestic industrial output. Third, it offers an avenue for channeling China's vast foreign exchange reserves into productive investments abroad, mitigating the risk of overheating its economy through excessive capital accumulation at home.

Beyond these strategic and economic drivers, some scholars propose a more structural explanation as well grounded in the dynamics of global capitalism. From this standpoint, the BRI functions as a "spatial fix," a concept developed by British geographer Harvey to describe how surplus capital in advanced economies seeks investment opportunities abroad to overcome crises of overaccumulation. While in previous decades this process saw Western capital investing in Chinese infrastructure following the country's economic opening, China now finds itself in a similar position, compelled to export capital to prevent the depreciation of its own financial assets. In this light, the BRI is not merely an instrument of foreign policy, but a structural component of China's growth strategy, essential for maintaining economic stability and ensuring continued development under conditions of intense global competition.

Given the fact that now it is widely acknowledged that the BRI has become a pivotal tool in China's broader strategy to sustain high economic growth and narrow the developmental gap with Western powers through a more assertive international posture, unsurprisingly this enhanced economic projection carries substantial geopolitical ramifications, particularly evident in regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa. Empirical data clearly illustrate the dramatic shifts that have occurred over recent decades, with China supplanting or challenging the traditional dominance of the EU and the United States in trade relationships. Between 1991 and 2020, China's share of Sub-Saharan Africa's exports surged from 4.9% to 17.5%. In contrast, during the same period, the EU's share modestly declined from 22.6% to 17.9%, while the United States experienced a much steeper fall, from 24.0% to just 5.2%. Similarly, China's imports from the region rose markedly, with its share growing from 3.9% to 18.7%, signaling a deeper integration into Africa's commodity markets. These trends are even more pronounced in resource-rich states such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where the proportion of exports destined for China soared from 11.3% to 51.0% over the same period. So, it is evident that such figures underline the extent to which the BRI has transformed global trade patterns and consolidated China's position as a dominant partner for many countries in the Global South²²⁴.

²²³Pietro Masina, *op.cit.*, pag. 11, 13

²²⁴Pietro Masina, *op.cit.*

The BRI has benefited from a variety of factors that have facilitated its acceptance, particularly among developing countries²²⁵. However, many of the same characteristics that contributed to its appeal have also prompted criticism and, in some cases, resistance. One of the primary facilitators of BRI implementation has been the significant volume of financial resources mobilized by China. Although official figures remain largely opaque, owing to the confidential nature of most agreements, estimates generally place the total financial commitment in the range of one trillion USD, with some assessments reaching as high as eight trillion²²⁶. Institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the Silk Road Fund, the China Development Bank, and the Export-Import Bank of China have played central roles in disbursing funds through simplified and streamlined mechanisms. In contrast to Western and multilateral financial institutions, BRI funding is typically devoid of policy conditionality: recipient countries are not required to undertake economic reforms, nor are they bound by strict environmental or social standards. This absence of constraints has thereby made BRI financing particularly attractive to authoritarian regimes²²⁷. Yet, it has also become a focal point of international concern. Scholars have noted that loan agreements by Chinese policy banks frequently incorporate “stabilization clauses” that carve exceptions into domestic regulatory frameworks, potentially undermining rule of law and weakening protections in areas such as environmental regulation, public health, and labor standards²²⁸.

An equally pressing concern is the impact of BRI financing on debt sustainability. Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Bank had warned that nearly one-third of participating countries were already at high risk of debt distress. While the BRI is not the sole cause of such fiscal vulnerabilities, it has undeniably exacerbated the situation in several instances²²⁹. A widely cited example is the case of Sri Lanka’s Hambantota Port²³⁰. In 2017, after the Sri Lankan government failed to service its debt obligations to Chinese lenders for infrastructure construction, it negotiated a 99-year lease of the port to China, including a transfer of 70% of the port's stakes and 15,000 acres of adjacent land encompassing the Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport²³¹. This event then gave

²²⁵Pietro Masina, *op.cit.*, pag. 11-12

²²⁶Jonathan E. Hillman, “How Big Is China’s Belt and Road?,” *CSIS*, April 3, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-big-chinas-belt-and-road>

²²⁷Pietro Masina, *op.cit.*

²²⁸Simone Tagliapietra, “The European Union’s Global Gateway: An Institutional and Economic Overview,” *The World Economy* 47, no. 4 (January 11, 2024): pag. 3, <https://doi.org/10.1111/twec.13551>

²²⁹*ibidem*

²³⁰Valeria Tabelli, *op.cit.*, pag. 9

²³¹Richard Herr, *Evaluating Chinese Soft-Power Effects in the Pacific Islands*, in *Chinese Influence in the Pacific Islands: The Yin and Yang of Soft Power* (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2019), pag. 1, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/chinese-influence-pacific-islands>

rise to accusations that Beijing was engaging in a form of "debt-trap diplomacy," using unsustainable loans to gain strategic assets and expand its geopolitical influence²³².

Beyond debt, there are also concerns regarding the strategic implications of certain BRI projects²³³. Infrastructure such as ports and railways, while ostensibly civilian in nature, may be subject to dual-use applications, enabling potential military deployment or geopolitical leverage in times of crisis. These security concerns have increasingly colored international discourse on the BRI, highlighting the potential risk of undermining political and economic stability in partner countries²³⁴.

Moreover, many of the flagship BRI projects have yielded limited returns for China itself, raising questions about the initiative's long-term viability²³⁵. As a result, Chinese authorities have grown more cautious, reorienting their focus from extensive infrastructure expansion toward more selective, higher-quality investments. A series of official strategy documents has suggested this recalibration, stressing financial prudence and risk mitigation. This shift also reflects a broader recognition among Chinese policymakers that the current international environment is increasingly defined by geopolitical volatility, making large-scale overseas investment less tenable. In this evolving context, China has therefore prioritized greater industrial and technological self-reliance as a hedge against rising global uncertainty²³⁶.

Besides the concerns that have surrounded the BRI, it is clearly the emergence of China as a global geopolitical leader that has served as a catalyst for the EU to articulate its own geopolitical response, culminating in the launch of the GG²³⁷. Conceived as a strategic tool to elevate the EU's global profile and counterbalance the influence of the BRI, GG represents the EU's first comprehensive effort to project itself as a geopolitical actor through connectivity²³⁸. The Council Conclusions on Connectivity, adopted in July 2021, provided the initial framework by outlining the strategic vision, principles, and objectives that would later underpin the Communication on Global Gateway and forge the broader narrative of EU external action²³⁹. As stated in the Conclusions, *the*

²³²Richard Herr, *op.cit.*

²³³Eric A. Miller, "More Chinese Military Bases in Africa: A Question of When, Not If," *Foreign Policy*, August 16, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/08/16/china-military-bases-africa-navy-pla-geopolitics-strategy/>

²³⁴Valeria Tabelli, *op.cit.*

²³⁵Iliana Olivié and María Santillán O'Shea, *Development Aid and Geopolitics: The EU's Global Gateway Initiative* (Madrid: Real Instituto Elcano, July 2023), pag. 12, <https://media.realinstitutoelcano.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/policy-paper-development-aid-and-geopolitics-the-eus-global-gateway-initiative.pdf>

²³⁶*ibidem*

²³⁷Eugénia C. Heldt, "Europe's Global Gateway: A New Instrument of Geopolitics," *Politics and Governance* 11, no. 4 (November 20, 2023): pag. 223-225, <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v11i4.7098>

²³⁸*ibidem*

²³⁹San Bilal and Chloe Teevan, *Global Gateway: Where Now and Where to Next?* (Maastricht: European Centre for Development Policy Management, June 2024), pag. 2, <https://ecdpm.org/application/files/1617/1776/7785/Global-Gateway-Where-now-and-where-to-next-ECDPM-Discussion-Paper-2024.pdf>

*Council considers that ensuring a geostrategic approach to connectivity has long-term implications for advancing the EU foreign policy and security interests and promoting EU values globally*²⁴⁰.

In light of this, European Commission President von der Leyen formally introduced the GG in September 2021, presenting it as a response to the global demand for “trusted connections that work for people and the planet”²⁴¹. More specifically, the initiative strives to strengthen the EU’s international engagement in infrastructure and connectivity, through the mobilization of up to €300 billion investments across six strategic domains: digital, climate and energy, transport, health, education, and research²⁴². In particular, the multiannual framework 2021–2027 sets out the initiative’s priorities, including the reinforcement of global connectivity, the improvement of health and education systems, the promotion of sustainability, and the enhancement of security and economic resilience in key regions, namely Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East, Asia and the Pacific, and Sub-Saharan Africa²⁴³⁻²⁴⁴.

Beyond that, GG is explicitly presented as a vehicle for projecting the EU’s SA and geopolitical influence in developing countries by providing tangible alternatives to BRI investments. In this vein, von der Leyen argued that *countries have made their experience with Chinese investment. And they need better and different offers... They know we are transparent; they know it is accompanied by good governance, they know there will be no unsustainable debt left over... and we bring on top of that the private sector with us, a private sector that in such a way does not exist in China. So, it is a true alternative*²⁴⁵. This is the reason why GG is often described in the EU as a “positive offer” that seeks to increase the coherence and visibility of EU external action, not merely by providing funding but by offering a distinctive model based on principles²⁴⁶. As a matter of fact, the initiative rests on the promotion of democratic values and high standards; commitment to good governance and transparency; the establishment of equal partnerships; environmental sustainability; a focus on security; and the mobilization of private sector investment²⁴⁷.

²⁴⁰Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions: A Globally Connected Europe* (Brussels: Council of the European Union, July 12, 2021), pag. 2, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10629-2021-INIT/en/pdf>

²⁴¹“Global Gateway,” European Commission, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway_en

²⁴²Iliana Olivíe and María Santillán O’Shea, *op.cit.*, pag. 10

²⁴³Valeria Tabelli, *op.cit.*, pag. 4

²⁴⁴European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the Commission, *Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the European Investment Bank: The Global Gateway* (Brussels, December 1, 2021), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52021JC0030>

²⁴⁵Eugénia C. Heldt, *op.cit.*, pag. 228

²⁴⁶Iliana Olivíe and María Santillán O’Shea, *op.cit.*, pag. 10

²⁴⁷*ibidem*

It is important, however, to contextualize the GG within a broader landscape of international responses to the BRI. A notable example is the Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative, launched in 2021 by former U.S. President Biden during the G7 Summit²⁴⁸. Like GG, B3W was conceived as a Western-led alternative to China's infrastructure diplomacy. However, it has thus far struggled to gain traction and remains, at best, an aspirational framework while its future appears increasingly uncertain, particularly given the return of the Trump administration in the United States which has already deprioritized multilateral development efforts altogether. Furthermore, the extent to which GG and B3W could be aligned or coordinated remains undefined. Rather than forming a coherent and complementary strategy, the lack of clear institutional synergy raises the risk of overlap, fragmentation, or even competition between the two frameworks²⁴⁹.

From an institutional and financial perspective, the EU Commission has assumed a central and proactive role in the design and implementation of the GG, positioning itself as both a transformational leader and an entrepreneurial actor²⁵⁰. Rather than simply coordinating national contributions, the Commission has deliberately opted for a governance model in which it takes the lead during the implementation phase, capitalizing on its technical expertise in managing international projects. In doing so, this strategic positioning displays a broader ambition to consolidate the EU's identity as a geopolitical community capable of coordinated and coherent external action. The governance framework underpinning the GG rests on the so-called "Team Europe" approach, which seeks to ensure close cooperation among EU institutions, the EEAS, development agencies of the member states, and European financial institutions. Hence, this model represents a decentralized but coordinated system designed to pool resources, harmonize efforts, and increase the EU's overall effectiveness and visibility abroad²⁵¹. Through this joint implementation framework, EU member states have committed to collectively invest up to €300 billion between 2021 and 2027, with the dual objective of supporting the development of partner countries and generating long-term benefits for local communities, while also creating new opportunities for European private sector actors²⁵². The funding mechanism draws on a constellation of already-existing instruments and institutions. These include the financial arms of the EU member states, the EIB, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). In addition, the EU Delegations in partner countries serve as key nodes for identifying local needs and ensuring alignment with strategic priorities on the ground. The initiative also builds on the EU's major external financial instruments, notably the

²⁴⁸Pietro Masina, *op.cit.*, pag. 13

²⁴⁹*ibidem*

²⁵⁰Eugénia C. Heldt, *op.cit.*, pag. 225-226

²⁵¹*ibidem*

²⁵²Valeria Tabelli, *op.cit.*, pag. 4-5

Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument Global Europe (NDICI), the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III), Interreg, InvestEU, and the Horizon Europe research and innovation program²⁵³.

Beyond the strategic and economic rationale on which the GG is based, it is now crucial to examine the strategic regional theatres in which the project is unfolding. Among these, Africa occupies a central role, widely recognized as one of the EU's primary geopolitical priority²⁵⁴. The decision to prioritize Africa stems largely from the growing presence and influence of China on the continent²⁵⁵. In response, the EU has sought to reinforce its position by using GG as a strategic tool to reassert its sphere of influence in a region historically characterized by deep political, economic and developmental ties with Europe, ties that have increasingly come under pressure due to Beijing's assertive foreign policy and expanding footprint.

As already shown, the variation in EU-Africa relations reveals a broader geoeconomic recalibration. While in 2010 the EU and China shared comparable investment volumes in Africa, each accounting for around 40% of total construction and infrastructure investments, by 2018 China's share had risen to 60%, whereas that of the EU had fallen to approximately 20%. Against this backdrop, GG emerges as part of a comprehensive strategy to rebuild European influence on the continent in which there is also widespread agreement among EU member states, particularly on the necessity of bolstering partnerships and preventing further erosion of the EU's presence in Africa²⁵⁶.

In light of its strategic relevance, Africa is the recipient of the largest investment package under the GG framework²⁵⁷⁻²⁵⁸. A total of €150 billion is expected to be deployed through Team Europe initiatives to support five core objectives: accelerating the green transition, boosting digital connectivity, fostering sustainable growth and decent employment, strengthening health and pharmaceutical systems, and enhancing access to education and training²⁵⁹. In terms of infrastructure, a central ambition is to align and integrate European and African multimodal transport networks, with a particular emphasis on the development of strategic corridors and the harmonization of regulatory frameworks and technical standards for construction and operations²⁶⁰. To date, eleven strategic

²⁵³Valeria Tabelli, *op.cit.*

²⁵⁴Simone Tagliapietra, *op.cit.*, pag. 5

²⁵⁵Eugénia C. Heldt, *op.cit.*, pag. 227

²⁵⁶*ibidem*

²⁵⁷Simone Tagliapietra, *op.cit.*

²⁵⁸“EU-Africa: Global Gateway Investment Package,” European Commission, https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/global-gateway/initiatives-sub-saharan-africa/eu-africa-global-gateway-investment-package_en

²⁵⁹Simone Tagliapietra, *op.cit.*

²⁶⁰Alessandro Gili and Francesco d'Ambrosio Lettieri, *Global Gateway: un tassello dell'autonomia strategica europea?* (Servizio Affari Internazionali, June 2023), pag. 7-9,

corridors have been identified. These will be instrumental in scaling up EU-Africa connectivity in a sustainable manner, facilitating trade and mobility both within the continent and between Africa and Europe. In turn, they are expected to serve as the backbone for the development of new regional value chains, benefiting both African and European industries. A key enabler of this ambition will be the development of robust digital interconnectivity infrastructure between the two continents. In this regard, the EurAfrica Gateway Cable, which will connect Europe to Africa along the Atlantic coast, intends to augment digital sovereignty, enhance data flows, and improve cybersecurity standards across both regions. This will be complemented by fiber optic regional networks intended to reduce the digital divide between coastal and landlocked states.

Energy investment also constitutes a cornerstone of the GG strategy in Africa. Up to €15 billion in investments are earmarked for green energy projects with three overarching goals: increasing the production and availability of renewable energy, improving access to electricity for African citizens, and supporting regional market integration and interconnection of electricity grids. Structural reforms in the energy sector will also be supported, with the aim of creating an enabling environment for private sector participation. Notably, the Africa-EU Green Energy Initiative seeks to mobilize at least 200 GW of additional renewable energy capacity by 2030, including 50 GW of electricity, and to provide at least 100 million people with access to electricity²⁶¹.

Nonetheless, the reception of the GG by African partner countries has been mixed. In several cases, the Chinese model under the BRI has been deemed more appealing²⁶². Many African governments favor China's approach because it provides clarity in terms of financial terms and timelines and is less encumbered by procedural complexity. In contrast, the EU's value-driven framework is often criticized as overly paternalistic and bureaucratically burdensome. In particular, the administrative procedures required to initiate EU-funded projects are frequently seen as ill-suited to the institutional capacities of recipient governments, many of which lack the resources to navigate intricate application and compliance processes.

Moreover, EU initiatives are often perceived as insufficiently responsive to the political and electoral dynamics that shape infrastructure demands in African countries. In contrast, Chinese-funded projects can be executed with greater expediency, an important consideration in environments where infrastructure development is closely tied to political timelines. Another point of contention relates to environmental standards. Although such criteria are critical from a long-term sustainability

<https://asep2014.parlamento.it/application/xmanager/projects/parlamento/file/repository/affariinternazionali/osservatorio/note/PI0102Not.docx.pdf>

²⁶¹*ibidem*

²⁶²Eugénia C. Heldt, *op.cit.*, pag. 230

perspective, they are often seen as a double-edged sword. In countries like Nigeria, while environmental concerns are acknowledged, they remain subordinate to the pressing need for basic infrastructure. As a result, when EU funding frameworks are perceived as obstructive or conditional, some African states seek alternatives, especially from China.

These perceptions are further substantiated by public opinion data. According to an Afrobarometer survey conducted between 2019 and 2021 in 34 African countries, 55% of respondents stated that external donors should grant African governments greater discretion over how to use development funding²⁶³. Similarly, 51% expressed the view that their governments should be free to make sovereign decisions regarding democracy and human rights, without external interference²⁶⁴.

Finally, the EU's framing of GG as a strategic counter to China has been interpreted by some African stakeholders as indicative of a broader geopolitical agenda. Rather than viewing the plan as a genuine effort to support African development, this framing risks reinforcing the perception that Africa is once again being treated as an arena for great power competition. Such a narrative not only undermines African agency but also jeopardizes the EU's efforts to position itself as a credible and equal partner²⁶⁵.

While Africa remains one of the main geographical focus of GG, other strategic regions have also emerged as important theatres for the EU's strategy. Among these, two cases stand out: one where the GG framework is being used as a counterbalance to China's growing influence, and another where cooperation with China appears more feasible and mutually beneficial. The first of these is the Western Balkans, a region where Beijing has established a notable presence through high-profile infrastructure projects, such as the Belgrade–Budapest railway and energy facilities in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina²⁶⁶. However, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the EU responded by reinforcing its geopolitical posture in the Western Balkans²⁶⁷. Through the GG, the EU signaled its intent to anchor these countries firmly within its sphere of influence, countering both Chinese and Russian inroads. In fact, the GG was complemented by the introduction of new programs specifically tailored to the Western Balkan states, alongside a renewed emphasis on the Eastern

²⁶³Josephine Sanny and Jaynisha Patel, "AD492: Beyond Borders? Africans Prefer Self-Reliant Development but Remain Skeptical of Free Trade and Open Borders," *Afrobarometer*, November 23, 2021, <https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/ad492-beyond-borders-africans-prefer-self-reliant-development-remain-skeptical-free/>

²⁶⁴*ibidem*

²⁶⁵Eugénia C. Heldt, *op.cit.*

²⁶⁶Branislav Stanicek and Simona Tarpova, *China's Strategic Interests in the Western Balkans*, European Parliamentary Research Service, June 2022, pag. 1-9, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)733558_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI(2022)733558_EN.pdf)

²⁶⁷Eugénia C. Heldt, *op.cit.* 228

Partnership framework²⁶⁸. In this context, former European Council President Michel, in a speech delivered in May 2022, had articulated a strategic vision for a “European Geopolitical Community”²⁶⁹. This concept had the purpose of fostering peace, stability, and security within the European continent by institutionalizing cooperation between the EU and neighboring countries, including the Western Balkans. The proposed framework involves annual high-level meetings between EU member states and partner countries, thereby consolidating political dialogue and reinforcing strategic alignment. Looking ahead, the EU will seek to deepen cooperation with Western Balkan countries across various sectors, including socio-economic development, education, and research. Most significantly, the geopolitical reconfiguration triggered by the war in Ukraine has revitalized the EU’s enlargement policy, with Brussels pledging to accelerate accession processes for candidate countries in the region²⁷⁰.

Another strategic region that has gained growing relevance since the launch of China’s BRI is Central Asia and the broader Greater Caspian area²⁷¹. In fact, the BRI has directed substantial infrastructure investments towards countries such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and, to a lesser extent, Turkmenistan. These investments have proved highly advantageous for Beijing, as they enable the development of overland transit routes connecting China with Europe, circumventing both Russia and Iran. The critical logistical artery in this context is the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), also known as the Middle Corridor, which links China to Europe via Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, and the South Caucasus. Operational since 2017, the corridor has seen significant growth, handling 2.3 million tons of cargo by 2023. The World Bank estimates that, with appropriate infrastructure upgrades, this figure could rise to 11 million tons by 2030. As displayed in the picture below, the corridor's strategic advantage is underscored by its geographical efficiency: it is approximately 2,000 km shorter than the traditional Northern Corridor through Russia.

²⁶⁸“European Commission Announces Additional €1.2 Billion Investment Package for Infrastructure and Support to Entrepreneurship in the Western Balkans,” European Commission , July 2, 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_3586

²⁶⁹1. “Charles Michel Calls for the Creation of a Geopolitical European Community - EU Neighbours East,” *EU NEIGHBOURSEAST*, <https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/latest-news/charles-michel-calls-for-the-creation-of-a-geopolitical-european-community/>

²⁷⁰Eugénia C. Heldt, *op.cit.*

²⁷¹Valeria Tabelli, *op.cit.*, pag. 12-16



Figure 7. Alternative routes from China to Europe. Source: Tabelli, 2024²⁷²

Key infrastructure nodes along the route, such as Kazakhstan’s Aktau port and Azerbaijan’s Baku port, offer vital maritime links across the Caspian Sea, reinforcing the corridor’s role as a viable alternative for transcontinental shipments, especially in the context of regional instability. The geopolitical implications of Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine have further shed the light on the EU’s need to diversify its connectivity routes. Given Iran’s political isolation, the South Caucasus has emerged as a particularly attractive option for EU engagement under the GG framework. Although a 2020 Asian Development Bank study pointed to continued infrastructure gaps in Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, significant progress has been made in recent years, especially in Azerbaijan, improving the feasibility of large-scale logistics corridors.

In light of this evolving context, the South Caucasus presents a window of opportunity for the EU to lead a more proactive role. Unlike Central Asia, where Chinese influence is already deeply entrenched, the South Caucasus remains comparatively underdeveloped in terms of Chinese investment. This asymmetry could allow the EU to make more targeted and impactful interventions, particularly in sectors such as railway modernization and port infrastructure along the Caspian

²⁷²Valeria Tabelli, *op.cit.*,

coastline. Hence, while many observers tend to frame the GG and the BRI as competing endeavors, their implementation in the South Caucasus might offer a more collaborative pathway²⁷³.

Therefore, the EU should consider prioritizing investments in this area, recognizing the strategic significance of the Middle Corridor in connecting Europe with China through stable, diversified supply chains. By leveraging the complementarities between the two initiatives, the EU could strengthen its own role. Indeed, while the BRI's strengths lie in large-scale physical infrastructure projects, particularly in transport and energy, the GG's comparative advantage resides in sectors such as digital infrastructure, green energy, and governance-based investment criteria. Aligning these strengths could facilitate projects that are both functionally effective and normatively sustainable, especially in regions that seek to avoid overdependence on any single partner.

This logic of collaboration is not without institutional support. The AIIB, founded in 2016 and comprising 19 EU member states, offers a potential platform for Sino-European cooperation. As a multilateral development bank focusing on infrastructure, it thus embodies a space where both Chinese and European interests converge. The bank could serve as an intermediary in coordinating development efforts along the Middle Corridor, reducing duplication, and filling critical infrastructure gaps²⁷⁴. To this end, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has already recommended the establishment of regular EU–China Roundtable meetings to exchange views on GG and BRI initiatives, particularly those involving the Middle Corridor, as a means of promoting pragmatic cooperation and addressing common challenges²⁷⁵.

Nonetheless, despite its ambition to emerge as a geopolitical actor through the GG, the EU faces several critical challenges²⁷⁶. The project's emphasis on values such as transparency, environmental standards, and social safeguards, although normatively commendable, risks remaining a declaratory agenda unless matched by effective implementation. Unlike the BRI, which currently boasts over 1,300 projects across 165 countries, the GG is still in its early operational phase, with few concrete projects fully launched. Thus, to compete credibly and engage cooperatively, the EU must prioritize not only the allocation of resources, but also the clarification of its strategic objectives and

²⁷³Luca Urciuolo, *The Middle Corridor Initiative – Where Europe and Asia Meet*, Briefing Paper (Bruxelles: European Institute for Asian Studies, March 2024), pag. 5-7, <https://eias.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Briefing-Paper-The-Middle-Corridor-Initiative-Where-Europe-and-Asia-Meet.docx.pdf>

²⁷⁴Valeria Tabelli, *op.cit.*

²⁷⁵“Impact Assessments and Active Involvement of Civil Society Should Be Guiding Principles for the Global Gateway Strategy,” European Economic and Social Committee, January 9, 2024, <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/news/impact-assessments-and-active-involvement-civil-society-should-be-guiding-principles-global-gateway-strategy>

²⁷⁶Alessia Amighini, “Europe Needs to Take Advantage of Its Global Gateway to Face China's Bri,” *ISPI*, June 5, 2024, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/europe-needs-to-take-advantage-of-its-global-gateway-to-face-chinas-bri-175614>

project pipeline. A fundamental requirement will be the EU's ability to offer attractive financial conditions, such as guarantees, soft loans, and grants to reduce investment risks and enhance debt sustainability for partner countries. At the same time, the EU must continue to distinguish its approach from Beijing's by promoting a model of connectivity based on transparent governance and sustainability²⁷⁷. This will require closer coordination between EU institutions, national development agencies, and private sector actors²⁷⁸.

Ultimately, by operationalizing a more coherent strategic vision, the EU can not only position itself as a more appealing geopolitical alternative to China's BRI—particularly in regions of immediate security interest, such as its eastern neighborhood—but also lay the groundwork for selective cooperation in areas like Western Asia, where joint efforts remain both viable and desirable²⁷⁹.

2.4 EU–China High-Level Strategic Dialogue: “Cooperative” Strategic Autonomy in Security and Geopolitical Affairs

In a rapidly deteriorating global security environment where meaningful channels of communication between the United States and China have been cancelled such as the U.S.–China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, the EU has opted for a different course. In this context, rather than resorting to open confrontation, the EU has sought to maintain and, where possible, expand avenues for dialogue with China²⁸⁰. This approach thus exemplifies its distinctive approach, one that mixes assertiveness with the preservation of engagement and collaboration.

Although the institutional framework for bilateral political contacts between the EU and China dates back to 1994 and was elevated to summit level in 1998, it is especially in the last decade that the dialogue architecture has expanded to cover an increasingly broad array of thematic areas. Over time, specific mechanisms were established to address emerging challenges in sensitive domains such as cybersecurity, non-proliferation, and international conflict resolution. For example, the EU–China

²⁷⁷Alessia Amighini, *op.cit.*

²⁷⁸Alicia Herrero, “David and Goliath: The EU's Global Gateway versus China's Belt and Road Initiative,” *Bruegel*, December 11, 2024, <https://www.bruegel.org/newsletter/david-and-goliath-eus-global-gateway-versus-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative>

²⁷⁹*ibidem*

²⁸⁰Weinian Hu, “A SURVEY OF THE EU-CHINA DIALOGUE ARCHITECTURE - PREMISE, STRUCTURE, FUNCTIONS, AND CASE STUDIES”, *European University Institute*, pag. 6-8, https://respect.eui.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2021/09/060921_FINAL_EU-China-dialogues21.pdf

Cyber Task Force was launched in 2013 in response to growing European concerns over Chinese cyber espionage and to facilitate mutual understanding on 5G standard-setting, technological research, and cross-border digital regulation.

Among the various institutional formats that structure EU–China interactions, the High-Level Strategic Dialogue (HLSD) has acquired special prominence. First convened in the early 2010s, this forum brings together the EU HR for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the Chinese Foreign Minister in a recurring dialogue that typically precedes the annual EU–China Summit. The HLSD is intended not only to prepare the ground for summit-level conclusions, but also to provide continuity in bilateral relations through long-term strategic planning. In this sense, it plays a critical role in shaping the macro-level design of the partnership and reinforcing the commitment to dialogue, even amid political frictions. The HLSD regularly addresses a wide spectrum of international and security-related topics, including regional crises, disarmament and non-proliferation, multilateral cooperation, counterterrorism, and cyber governance. Its broad thematic scope underlines the fact that, in some key areas, both parties can share converging interests, particularly in preserving multilateral order and mitigating systemic risks. In this respect, the HLSD typifies the potential for mutual benefit through structured cooperation, even when broader bilateral relations are strained. As such, it embodies a model of “managed disagreement”, in which enduring policy divergences are contained through institutionalized dialogue and a shared commitment to pragmatic engagement²⁸¹.

According to Professor Wang of the Beijing Foreign Studies University, the most recent iteration of the dialogue held in Brussels in summer 2025 marked the first major strategic security communication under the European Commission’s current mandate and served to set the tone for the commemorations of the 50th anniversary of EU–China diplomatic relations²⁸². Despite escalating global tensions, exacerbated by US tariff policies and intensifying Sino-American rivalry, Chinese officials emphasized that the HLSD was part of a long-standing diplomatic agenda, not a reactive adjustment to external pressures. In this regard, Wang rejected the interpretation circulating in Western media that framed the dialogue as a tactical maneuver by China to counterbalance US influence in Europe. Instead, he stressed that the initiative reflects a deeper commitment to shared responsibilities in global governance and the continuity of diplomatic engagement between Brussels and Beijing²⁸³.

²⁸¹Weinian Hu, *op.cit.*

²⁸²Sheng Shen, “Senior Chinese, European Diplomats to Hold Strategic Dialogue,” *Global Times*, June 29, 2025, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202506/1337241.shtml>

²⁸³*ibidem*

Regarding the 13th HLSD, co-chaired by HR/VP Kallas and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang, focused on the evolving geopolitical and security landscape²⁸⁴. According to official readouts from both the EEAS and the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it emerges that Kallas described the EU and China as partners sharing common responsibilities and exerting significant influence on significant global issues, including the preservation of the United Nations' central role and the defense of international law and the rules-based international order²⁸⁵. She further expressed the EU's willingness to strengthen mutual understanding through continued dialogue and to build a more constructive and stable relationship with China. On the Chinese side, Wang stressed that EU–China relations should be defined by partnership rather than rivalry, with cooperation representing the anchor of the bilateral relationship. He also emphasized that China and the EU, as two major powers, should deepen exchanges, foster mutual trust, and jointly safeguard the international order established after the Second World War, thereby providing much-needed certainty in a time of global instability. At the conclusion of the meeting, Wang reiterated that China has always supported European integration and the EU's efforts to strengthen its SA and play a constructive role in international affairs, while at the same time expressing hope that the EU would reciprocate by respecting China's core interests through concrete actions²⁸⁶.

The discussions also touched upon concrete international crises²⁸⁷. For instance, both parties welcomed the de-escalation of tensions following the 12-day war between Israel and Iran and reaffirmed their support for the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as the linchpin of the global non-proliferation regime. However, sharp divergences emerged over the conflict in Ukraine. Kallas explicitly raised concerns about China's indirect support to Russia's military-industrial complex through dual-use exports and called on Beijing to cease all material assistance that sustains the Kremlin's war efforts. She also urged China to support an immediate and unconditional ceasefire, as well as a durable peace based on the principles of the UN Charter²⁸⁸.

Yet, despite these disagreements, the very fact that such issues could be addressed through the HLSD sheds light on the critical role of dialogue in preserving a degree of trust and predictability in the EU–China relationship. In a global context where communication between other great powers is often minimal or suspended, the HLSD offers a unique diplomatic channel that allows both parties to

²⁸⁴“China: High Representative/Vice-President Kaja Kallas Holds EU-China Strategic Dialogue with Foreign Minister Wang Yi,” EEAS, July 2, 2025, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/china-high-representativevice-president-kaja-kallas-holds-eu-china-strategic-dialogue-foreign_en

²⁸⁵“China, EU Hold 13th Round of High-Level Strategic Dialogue,” Xinhua, July 4, 2025, https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202507/04/content_WS6868bf8cc6d0868f4e8f3db8.html

²⁸⁶*ibidem*

²⁸⁷EEAS, *op.cit.*

²⁸⁸*ibidem*

manage tensions, clarify intentions, and coordinate on matters of mutual concern. Hence, the ability of the EU to continue engaging with China on security and geopolitical issues, while clearly expressing its red lines, underscore a form of cooperative autonomy that lies at the heart of its emerging global posture.

2.5 Between Competition and Cooperation in the Economic Dimension of EU Strategic Autonomy: The EU's De-Risking Approach

Building on the previous sections, it finally becomes evident that the EU's pursuit of foreign policy autonomy has taken different forms depending on the nature of its interests and the specific regional context vis-à-vis China. If Readiness 2030 displays a model of "defensive assertiveness" in the face of Beijing's military rise and ensuing influence on the European continent, the GG combines both competitive and cooperative logics depending on the geography. Finally, this overall approach should be briefly complemented by a third and increasingly prominent vector of SA, economic security, and the EU's corresponding strategy of "de-risking". Therefore, before analyzing how the EU has calibrated its security posture toward China in Ukraine and in the broader Indo-Pacific region, it is necessary to quickly examine this de-risking strategy, especially as it has accelerated since Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Beijing's direct and indirect support for Moscow.

As a matter of fact, the COVID-19 pandemic and the shock triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine have profoundly reshaped global perceptions of economic interdependence, revealing the strategic vulnerabilities embedded within highly globalized and politically heterogeneous supply chains²⁸⁹. In this context of compounded crises, long-standing concerns over the West's structural dependence on China have intensified, particularly regarding Europe's exposure²⁹⁰. Consequently, the concept of de-risking has rapidly gained traction across EU policy circles, emerging as a central axis of the Union's evolving approach to China²⁹¹. Unlike the United States, which has openly embraced a strategy of "decoupling" from the Chinese economy, the EU has opted for a more flexible path. In fact, the Commission's approach seeks to reconcile legitimate security and geopolitical concerns with the recognition of the EU's comparatively weaker strategic posture and the economic

²⁸⁹Paolo Pellegrini, "De-Risking vs Decoupling: La Nuova 'Dottrina' Cinese Di Unione Europea e Stati Uniti: Il Caffè Geopolitico," *Il Caffè Geopolitico*, May 31, 2023, <https://ilcaffegeopolitico.net/972156/de-risking-vs-decoupling-la-nuova-dottrina-cinese-di-unione-europea-e-stati-uniti>

²⁹⁰*ibidem*

²⁹¹Nicola Casarini, "Europe's de-Risking from China: Dead on Arrival?," *IAI*, March 24, 2025, <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/c05/europes-de-risking-china-dead-arrival>

benefits derived from its commercial ties with China. In addition, the EU, in contrast to the U.S., does not face the imperative of preserving an imperial global role²⁹².

To begin with, over the past two decades the intensity and scope of trade between the EU and China have expanded significantly, prompting a fundamental transformation in the nature of their economic relationship²⁹³. What was once a largely complementary exchange has progressively evolved into a dynamic characterized by more competition. A pivotal factor in this shift has been the reorientation of China's industrial policy, which has moved away from its traditional reliance on low-cost manufacturing and heavy industry, focusing instead on high-tech sectors and segments of production with greater added value. As early as 2010, Beijing began prioritizing the development of strategic emerging industries, a category that has steadily broadened to encompass advanced technologies such as new energy systems, telecommunications infrastructure, innovative materials, AI, cutting-edge semiconductors, and quantum technologies. This trajectory culminated in the 2015 launch of the "Made in China 2025 strategy", which explicitly strived to foster technological self-sufficiency and to assert Chinese leadership across critical nodes of global value chains in strategic sectors. Simultaneously, the EU has identified many of these same industries as essential to the twin transitions (digital and ecological) that are vital to both sustainable global development and the long-term prosperity of the European economy. However, this convergence of industrial priorities has intensified economic rivalry, compelling the EU to remodel its policy approach toward China. While European concern does not stem inherently from Beijing's ambition to enhance its technological competitiveness, apprehensions have grown not only around the methods employed to achieve this end, particularly the state-driven distortions of market dynamics, but mainly the dependencies these distortions have generated across several strategic sectors²⁹⁴.

At a macroeconomic level, the scale of interdependence is striking: the EU and China collectively account for nearly 30% of global trade in goods and services and over one-third of global GDP²⁹⁵. In 2024 alone, trade flows between the two partners exceeded €845 billion. China ranks as the EU's third-largest trading partner for goods and services combined, while the EU is China's leading commercial counterpart. Yet beneath these impressive figures lies a pronounced asymmetry. The EU's imports from China surpassed €500 billion, whereas Chinese imports from the EU remained

²⁹²Nicola Casarini, *op.cit.*

²⁹³Andreea Brinza et al., *EU-China Relations: De-risking or De-coupling – the Future of the EU Strategy towards China*, Policy Department for External Relations, Directorate-General for External Policies, European Parliament (Brussels: European Union, March 2024), pag. 55-65,
[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2024/754446/EXPO_STU\(2024\)754446_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2024/754446/EXPO_STU(2024)754446_EN.pdf)

²⁹⁴*ibidem*

²⁹⁵"EU-China Trade: Facts and Figures - Consilium," European Council, August 8, 2025,
<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/eu-china-trade/>

under €300 billion²⁹⁶. This imbalance not only underscores the lopsided nature of the trade relationship but also raises alarms about Europe's growing reliance on China for highly strategic inputs, most notably critical raw materials that underpin several industrial ecosystems, including automotive manufacturing, aerospace, renewable energy, steel production, and defense²⁹⁷. As a point of fact, China supplies the EU with 98% of its demand for heavy rare earth elements. At the same time, these materials serve indispensable functions: tungsten enables smartphone vibration mechanisms; gallium and indium are integral to LED lighting technologies; silicon metal is a core component of semiconductors; and hydrogen-based technologies such as fuel cells and electrolysis rely on platinoids²⁹⁸.

The geopolitical ramifications of such dependencies have also become increasingly evident²⁹⁹. Over the past decade, China has displayed a readiness to exercise economic statecraft, using its commercial weight to advance broader diplomatic objectives. A notable precedent occurred in 2010, when China reportedly suspended exports of rare earths to Japan amid a territorial dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. More recently, as diplomatic tensions escalated between China and Sweden, Swedish imports of graphite, a material dominated globally by Chinese production and crucial to battery technologies, were reportedly disrupted, with shipments halted entirely in 2021 and 2022.

As a result of China's growing technological capabilities and the EU's deepening dependencies in strategic sectors, European concern over the asymmetric nature of this relationship has significantly intensified³⁰⁰. In the words of EU Parliament's China rapporteur Vautmans, *such dependencies weaken us and can be used against us, as our dependency on Russian energy has shown*³⁰¹. In response to these mounting vulnerabilities, Commission President von der Leyen formally introduced the notion of de-risking in March 2023: while specifically aimed at mitigating the risks associated with China's commercial and technological dominance, this concept was also designed to offer a European alternative to the more radical decoupling strategy increasingly promoted by Washington³⁰². Indeed, the logic behind decoupling reflects a growing distrust of the

²⁹⁶European Council, *op.cit.*

²⁹⁷Eric Van den Abeele, *Towards a New Paradigm in Open Strategic Autonomy?* (Bruxelles: European Trade Union Institute, June 2021), pag. 9-10, https://www.etui.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/Towards%20a%20new%20paradigm%20in%20open%20strategic%20autonomy_2021.pdf

²⁹⁸Eric Van den Abeele, *op.cit.*

²⁹⁹Andreea Brinza et al., *op.cit.*

³⁰⁰*ibidem*

³⁰¹*ivi*, pag. 59

³⁰²“Speech by President von Der Leyen on EU-China Relations to the Mercator Institute for China Studies and the European Policy Centre,” European Commission, March 30, 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_2063

liberal international trade order and the economic globalization model of the past three decades³⁰³. By contrast, the EU, deeply rooted in principles of openness and interdependence, has embraced de-risking as a more balanced and pragmatic approach in order to strike an equilibrium between preserving access to global markets and technologies while at the same reducing exposure to coercive or strategically sensitive dependencies. The vast majority of commercial ties with China do not pose security threats; thus, an overreaction could inadvertently undermine European interests. Accordingly, de-risking has been embedded within the broader EU Economic Security Strategy (ESS), officially launched in the summer of 2023, which strives to increase the Union's systemic resilience³⁰⁴. Although de-risking was originally formulated within the context of the EU's evolving China policy, the strategy is explicitly designed in a country-agnostic manner. In particular, it rests on three interlinked pillars that mirror the logics of risk mitigation: promoting EU's competitiveness ("offensive de-risking"); protecting economic security ("defensive de-risking"); and building deeper cooperation with trusted international partners ("collaborative de-risking")³⁰⁵.

Concerning the first pillar, the EU has initiated a series of forward-looking measures to diversify supply chains and bolster both industrial and technological competitiveness, with the overarching goal of increasing resilience and reinforcing strategic sovereignty, particularly in the technological domain³⁰⁶. The COVID-19 pandemic notably exposed the EU's critical dependencies and the fragility of global supply chains, especially in relation to China. In response, the Union has sought to strengthen its internal capabilities through investment in research and innovation, the development of human capital, and the establishment of a more robust and autonomous industrial policy. At the EU level, this ambition has materialized through several Important Projects of Common European Interest (IPCEI), alongside flagship initiatives such as the EU Chips Act³⁰⁷. The Chips Act emerges as a strategic response to the current global distribution of semiconductor production: while the design and research of semiconductors are primarily concentrated in the United States, production remains heavily dominated by Asia, with Taiwan accounting for approximately 60% of the global output³⁰⁸⁻³⁰⁹. Most chips are then assembled, tested, and packaged in mainland China. Considering

³⁰³ Andreea Brinza et al., *op.cit.*

³⁰⁴ European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council on "European Economic Security Strategy"* (Brussels: European Union, 20 June 2023), pag. 1-14, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52023JC0020>

³⁰⁵ Andreea Brinza et al., *op.cit.*

³⁰⁶ *ibidem*

³⁰⁷ *ibidem*

³⁰⁸ "European Chips Act," European Commission, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/european-chips-act_en

³⁰⁹ Josephine Condemi et. al., "Chips Act: Cosa è e Cosa Prevede," *Agenda Digitale*, June 12, 2025, <https://www.agendadigitale.eu/infrastrutture/chips-act-cosa-e-e-cosa-prevede/>

rising geopolitical instability in the Indo-Pacific region and escalating US-China trade tensions, Europe has been prompted to reduce its reliance on these countries and promote the strategic resilience of its own semiconductor sector. Hence, the Chips Act was introduced with the purpose of directing public investment towards the development of an independent European value chain for chip design and manufacturing. More specifically, the regulation allocates €43 billion to this initiative, with the objective of doubling the EU's share in global semiconductor production from the current 10% to 20% by 2030³¹⁰. Another cornerstone of this industrial strategy is the Critical Raw Materials Act, which sets specific benchmarks for 2030: 10% of critical mineral extraction, 40% of their processing, and 15% of their recycling should take place within the EU³¹¹. Moreover, it seeks to ensure that no more than 65% of any strategic raw material originates from a single third-country supplier³¹². Parallel to these efforts, both the EU and several member states have increasingly aligned with a broader international trend towards the adoption of assertive industrial policies³¹³. However, this approach entails two principal risks for Europe. First, it may contribute to the intensification of protectionist dynamics, further fragmenting the global economy and heightening rivalries, particularly with China. Second, it could jeopardize the cohesion of the single market by amplifying existing disparities among member states in their ability to mobilize resources and provide state aid. These concerns are particularly evident in the asymmetry between member states with greater fiscal and technical capacity, such as France and Germany, and those with more limited means. Notably, France and Germany alone accounted for 77% of the €672 billion in state aid approved under the Temporary Crisis Framework. Therefore, in implementing offensive de-risking, the EU must carefully navigate the need to boost competitiveness while simultaneously managing internal inequalities and avoiding an inadvertent shift towards economic nationalism.

Turning to the second pillar, the EU has also intensified efforts to strengthen its economic security and mitigate risks by developing a set of defensive instruments. Although China remains a central concern, these tools are intentionally designed to be country-agnostic, anchored in a principled approach rather than tailored against any specific actor. Broadly speaking, two distinct categories of measures are being formulated: those falling under the EU Commission's exclusive competence, particularly in the realm of trade defense, and those that remain primarily within the remit of member states, for which the Commission provides strategic guidance and coordination support³¹⁴. The first

³¹⁰Josephine Condemi et. al., *op.cit.*

³¹¹"Critical Raw Materials Act," Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs, https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/sectors/raw-materials/areas-specific-interest/critical-raw-materials/critical-raw-materials-act_en

³¹²*ibidem*

³¹³Andreea Brinza et al., *op.cit*

³¹⁴*ibidem*

category includes mechanisms designed to counteract market distortions (many of which originate in China) and to uphold a fair and balanced economic playing field through the principle of reciprocity. Instruments such as the International Procurement Instrument (IPI), along with anti-subsidy and anti-dumping tools, exemplify this approach³¹⁵. The IPI, in particular, aspires to regulate the access of non-EU entities to European public procurement markets³¹⁶. Should a third country refuse to reciprocate by offering comparable access to its own procurement markets, the EU reserves the right to restrict access for entities from that country. In this way, the IPI operates not only as a defensive mechanism against discriminatory practices but also as a coercive diplomatic tool through which the EU can exert pressure on non-EU states to open their markets³¹⁷. While these instruments fall within the EU's exclusive jurisdiction, they also complement the goals of offensive de-risking by reinforcing Europe's economic competitiveness³¹⁸. Nevertheless, there remains a latent risk that these measures could contribute to a broader protectionist drift. For this reason, the Commission consistently emphasizes that their intent is to re-balance international trade relations rather than to undermine the rules-based system. The second category of defensive instruments focuses on shielding critical infrastructure and strategic sectors from malign foreign influence, the weaponization of dependencies, and the risk of technological leakage. In this regard, the Commission has elaborated a series of guidelines, toolkits, and coordination frameworks to support national-level implementation. Among these, the most significant are the Inbound Foreign Direct Investment Screening Regulation and the newly adopted Anti-Coercion Instrument (ACI)³¹⁹. The FDI regulation is intended to foster cooperation among member states in the scrutiny of inbound investments that may pose a threat to public order or security³²⁰. Although the regulation does not grant the Commission direct authority to block investments, it mandates structured information-sharing mechanisms and collaborative screening practices even for those member states lacking a domestic screening regime. In doing so, the regulation promotes convergence among member states and increases awareness of potential geoeconomic risks. The ACI, for its part, empowers the Commission to respond to economic coercion exercised by non-EU countries, namely those engaging in trade or investment restrictions intended to pressure the EU or its member states for geopolitical reasons. This mechanism thus equips the EU with a legal basis to impose countermeasures, thereby safeguarding the Union's policy autonomy. A prominent example underlining the relevance of this instrument was the Chinese embargo imposed

³¹⁵Andreea Brinza et al., *op.cit*

³¹⁶Hillebrand Pohl, *Open Strategic Autonomy and the New Geoeconomics: Consequences for EU Trade Policy*, Policy Brief No. 18 (South Australia: The University of Adelaide, 2023), pag. 2-3, <https://iit.adelaide.edu.au/ua/media/2102/iit-pb18-open-strategic-autonomy-final-v2.pdf>

³¹⁷Hillebrand Pohl, *op.cit*.

³¹⁸Andreea Brinza et al., *op.cit*

³¹⁹*ibidem*

³²⁰Hillebrand Pohl, *op.cit*.

on Lithuanian exports in late 2021, following the opening of a “Taiwanese Representative Office” in Vilnius³²¹.

The third and final component of the EU’s de-risking strategy sheds light on deepening partnerships with trusted international actors to promote economic security and strengthen resilience by diversifying global value chains³²². At the bilateral level, the EU has consolidated dialogue with allies such as the United States, Japan, and South Korea, which have similarly prioritized economic security in their respective national agendas. Institutionalized fora such as the EU–US Trade and Technology Council and the High-Level Economic Dialogue with Japan have become increasingly central for the alignment of regulatory frameworks, information exchange, and coordination of policy tools. Additionally, plurilateral platforms like the G7 have also their importance: in May 2023, a joint declaration on “Economic Resilience and Economic Security” displayed consensus among advanced economies on the need to collectively address supply chain risks and technological dependencies³²³. Nonetheless, cooperation is not without its complications. Competition over industrial policy tools, such as subsidies and investment incentives, has created friction, especially in transatlantic relations. Beyond long-standing allies, the EU is also seeking to fortify partnerships with countries across the Global South as part of its broader diversification strategy. Many developing nations have shown an increasing interest in attracting infrastructure investment and in integrating more deeply into global supply chains, especially in areas related to the extraction and transformation of critical raw materials. In this context, the EU’s GG initiative (discussed in earlier sections) serves a dual purpose: it supports the economic development of partner countries while advancing the EU’s own resilience by diversifying sources of key inputs and reducing overreliance on single suppliers such as China.

A final, yet critical, question remains: does the EU possess the political determination required to effectively de-risk its relationship with China? In practice, the Union still appears to be in the early stages of this agenda, engaged primarily in assessing the scale and nature of its dependencies and strategic vulnerabilities. This evaluative phase is foundational for clarifying the true scope and priorities of the de-risking process. As a 2022 report by the European Think-Tank Network on China (ETNC) revealed, significant disparities persist among member states in terms of their interests, awareness, and policy engagement vis-à-vis economic dependencies on China. Since then, the EU Commission, under the broader umbrella of its ESS, has initiated detailed assessments in cooperation with member states, an effort that has gradually raised awareness among national governments about

³²¹Hillebrand Pohl, *op.cit.*

³²²Andreea Brinza et al., *op.cit.*

³²³“G7 Leaders’ Statement on Economic Resilience and Economic Security,” European Council, May 20, 2023, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/05/20/g7-leaders-statement-on-economic-resilience-and-economic-security/>

the risks posed by overreliance on strategic partners, particularly China³²⁴. Still, the Council has yet to formally endorse the Commission's proposed ESS. As a result, many of its proposed tools, whether offensive or defensive, remain aspirational and unadopted.

The concept of de-risking itself, at least in relation to China, also continues to lack a unified understanding or widespread consensus across the EU. Divergences stem from multiple factors. On the one hand, member states exhibit varied economic interests and strategic exposure. On the other, they hold contrasting views on the role the state should play in shaping market behavior and regulating foreign influence over national industries. Germany provides a telling example. While its national China strategy formally supports the EU's de-risking goals, Berlin has often taken a cautious and market-driven stance given its extensive commercial interests with China. The German Chancellery has consistently emphasized that the responsibility for de-risking lies primarily with private companies. However, this has resulted in a paradox: although many small and medium-sized enterprises in Germany perceive China as a geopolitical and economic risk, larger firms have instead doubled down on their presence in the Chinese market to secure access to high-tech infrastructure and R&D networks, which they view as essential to their global competitiveness. In practice, then, de-risking has been interpreted by some as a justification to deepen, rather than reduce, ties with China.

France presents a different set of dynamics. The French government has historically favored a more interventionist industrial approach, backing stronger state-led economic tools such as investment screening. Nonetheless, President Macron has shown political reluctance to adopt an openly confrontational stance toward Beijing. In practice, however, France has enacted regulatory measures that effectively restrict China's access to sectors considered strategically sensitive, such as 5G telecommunications and electric vehicles. French officials often argue that placing corporate profits above national strategic interests contributed to the deindustrialization of the country and the creation of structural dependencies. From this perspective, France's ambivalence towards the EU's economic security framework seems rooted not in opposition, but in the conviction that many of the tools necessary to ensure resilience still fall under the sovereign prerogatives of member states rather than the EU institutions.

Another underlying challenge concerns the balance between maintaining an open economy and avoiding the slide toward protectionism and excessive securitization³²⁵. Some voices within the European policy community have advocated for abandoning the EU's country-neutral, principle-

³²⁴ Andreea Brinza et al., *op.cit*

³²⁵ *ibidem*

based approach in favor of a more targeted China-specific de-risking doctrine. Nonetheless, the reality remains that China is but one among multiple concerns in Europe's broader economic security calculus³²⁶.

At its core, the logic behind de-risking is to enable the EU to reach a level of SA that allows it to assert and defend its interests, not only with respect to China, but also vis-à-vis the United States, Russia, and other actors. Simultaneously, the Commission's strategy seeks to preempt and contain a broader decoupling of the global economy, a process that could further fragment multilateral trade and deepen systemic rivalries. The intention, instead, is to restrict the scope of economic separation to sectors with direct implications for security and geopolitical resilience, while upholding the rules-based international order. Indeed, China remains an essential partner in several domains vital to Europe's green and digital transitions. European firms continue to rely on the Chinese market and industrial ecosystem not only for export opportunities, but also as a source of technological input and R&D collaboration. In this light, the de-risking agenda should not be seen as a wholesale retreat from engagement, but rather as a risk management framework. The Commission, along with numerous member states and economic stakeholders, appears committed to maintaining lines of communication and cooperation with China in non-sensitive sectors. Nonetheless, there is a growing perception in Beijing that Europe's evolving strategy, particularly its adoption of defensive economic instruments, signals a broader deterioration in bilateral trust. Therefore, reconciling Europe's pursuit of resilience with China's perception of hostility will be essential moving forward, especially in light of the ongoing war in Ukraine and Beijing's partnership with Moscow³²⁷.

³²⁶ Andreea Brinza et al., *op.cit*

³²⁷ *ibidem*

CHAPTER 3. STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN ACTION: THE EU'S REGION-SPECIFIC SECURITY APPROACHES TOWARD CHINA

At this stage of the analysis, it now becomes essential to examine why a more autonomous EU foreign policy would result in regionally differentiated approaches in its security relationship with China. This chapter seeks to address this question through the comparative exploration of two emblematic case studies: the war in Ukraine, on the one hand, and the Indo-Pacific theatre, on the other.

3.1.1 From Biden to Trump: Evolving American Objectives in the Russo-Ukrainian War

Beginning with Ukraine, it is first necessary to contextualize the unique and unprecedented response of the EU to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine by comparing it with the evolving strategic stance of the United States from the Biden to the Trump administrations.

Under President Biden, the United States demonstrated robust and sustained support for Ukraine³²⁸. Since the outbreak of the full-scale invasion in 2022, the U.S Congress passed five major aid packages, most recently in April 2024, amounting to a total budgetary commitment of approximately \$175 billion, with the majority allocated to military assistance. In addition, the U.S. government provided Ukraine with a \$20 billion loan, funded by the interest accrued on frozen Russian assets. According to data from the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, roughly \$128 billion of this total was directly transferred to Ukraine, while the remainder financed broader U.S. operations related to the conflict, with a minor share directed toward assisting other countries in the region impacted by the war³²⁹. However, it is important to note that a significant portion of these funds were in fact spent domestically in the United States, sustaining local industries and workers tasked with manufacturing the weapons delivered to Ukraine or replenishing American arsenals depleted by transfers to Kyiv³³⁰.

³²⁸Jonathan Masters and Will Merrow, "Here's How Much Aid the United States Has Sent Ukraine," *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 15, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/article/how-much-us-aid-going-ukraine#chapter-title-0-1>

³²⁹Christoph Trebesch et al., "Kiel Institute for the World Economy," *Kiel Institute*, August 6, 2025, <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/publications/ukraine-support-tracker-data-20758/>

³³⁰Jonathan Masters and Will Merrow, *op.cit.*

Yet, while the Biden administration's commitment was steadfast, it was largely driven by geopolitical considerations extending beyond Ukraine: U.S. officials perceived Russia's invasion not as a direct existential threat, but rather as a critical test of the rules-based international order and a benchmark for U.S. credibility among allies, particularly in the Indo-Pacific³³¹. In 2024, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Wallender articulated this strategic logic by asserting that *while supporting Ukraine is the right thing to do, U.S. support is about more than just Ukraine. Russian actions have implications around the world. It's not just a European security issue, it is a global security issue. If Putin is successful in shredding the United Nations Charter and benefiting from the use of force in Europe, what's to stop China from following that path when it is ready to invade Taiwan?*³³² Thus, this framing of the war recast Ukraine as a proving ground for U.S. global deterrence, especially in relation to China and the potential conflict over Taiwan. In short, the Biden administration's strategic rationale for supporting Ukraine was less about directly countering Russia than about preventing a deterrence failure in Europe that could embolden actors like China elsewhere, especially in the Indo-Pacific.

Nonetheless, criticisms were levelled against Biden's approach³³³. Detractors argued that the support provided to Ukraine was often delayed and insufficient, that there was no long-term strategy beyond the mantra of assisting Kyiv "for as long as it takes", and that Washington was unwilling to push for a definitive Russian defeat, fearing the destabilizing effects of a potential collapse of the Russian state. Despite these shortcomings, Biden's strategy achieved four key outcomes: Ukraine's survival as a sovereign state, the recapture of significant territories seized by Russia early in the war, the substantial weakening of the Russian military machine and a renewed transatlantic cooperation³³⁴.

However, this relatively consistent posture came under pressure with the return of Trump to the presidency in 2025³³⁵. In March of this year, Trump abruptly suspended all military aid to Ukraine, only to reverse the decision shortly thereafter following ceasefire talks held in Saudi Arabia. A similar pattern unfolded in July, with aid deliveries temporarily frozen and then reinstated within days. Although Trump's dissatisfaction with President Putin reportedly increased as negotiations have stagnated, his administration nonetheless pursued a markedly different course of action. As a matter of fact, Trump unveiled a new plan under which European allies agreed (to keep Trump in the game)

³³¹"DOD Official Restates Why Supporting Ukraine Is in U.S. Interest," U.S. Department of War, September 2025, <https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/article/3671938/dod-official-restates-why-supporting-ukraine-is-in-us-interest/>

³³²*ibidem*

³³³Alexander Motyl, "Trump's Ukraine Policy Makes Biden Look like a Genius," *THE HILL*, July 3, 2025, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/5177702-trumps-ukraine-policy-makes-biden-look-like-a-genius/>

³³⁴*ibidem*

³³⁵Jonathan Masters and Will Merrow, *op.cit.*

to finance 100% of U.S. weapons destined for Ukraine, effectively shifting the financial burden to Europe. Trump's rhetoric has also significantly diverged from Biden's. On multiple occasions, he has accused Ukraine of both initiating and prolonging the conflict, positioning himself as a neutral mediator seeking to broker peace³³⁶.

Obviously, this stance displays a deeper strategic shift: the Trump administration does not regard Russian advances in Ukraine as a potential trigger for further aggression against European allies but rather sees the conflict as a European issue disconnected from core U.S. interests³³⁷. The overarching ambition appears to be the conclusion of a new geopolitical settlement with Russia, one that entails American disengagement from Ukraine and European security more broadly, in exchange for Russian cooperation on extra-European dossiers such as Arctic resource management, nuclear arms control, and crises in Iran, North Korea, and Syria. Certain elements within the administration have even entertained the notion of a so-called "reverse Kissinger" strategy, whereby a recalibrated U.S. relationship with Russia could ultimately serve to undermine or disrupt the strategic alignment between Moscow and Beijing.

Compounding this geopolitical calculus is a domestic ideological current within Trump's political base that conceives Russia not merely as a strategic interlocutor but as a like-minded conservative power, upholding conservative values and standing against liberal international norms. This cultural affinity has reinforced the administration's reluctance to hold Moscow accountable, shifting blame for the conflict onto Ukraine. Unlike in Trump's first term, his second administration is also less constrained by moderating voices. Key figures such as Vice President Vance and Defense Secretary Hegseth have consistently advocated for a rapid pivot away from Europe towards the Indo-Pacific, arguing that the United States would be ill-prepared for a potential war with China and must prioritize its own southern border security over European defense commitments.

Ultimately, the Trump administration's approach underscores a fundamental realignment in American strategic priorities. Rather than preserving Ukraine's sovereignty and sustaining European security on the eastern flank, Washington's objective under Trump is to portray himself as a peacemaker while leveraging disengagement from Europe as a bargaining chip in pursuit of broader geopolitical goals. Finally, this reversal in American engagement not only has exposed the volatility of U.S. leadership in transatlantic security but also highlighted the growing imperative for the EU to

³³⁶Jonathan Masters and Will Mellow, *op.cit.*

³³⁷Célia Belin et al., "The Art of the Peace Deal: What the Trump Administration Wants from the Russia-Ukraine Negotiations," *ECFR*, April 3, 2025, <https://ecfr.eu/article/the-art-of-the-peace-deal-what-the-trump-administration-wants-from-the-russia-ukraine-negotiations/>

chart a more autonomous course in managing the repercussions of the war and its implications for global power competition³³⁸.

3.1.2 Securing the Neighborhood: The EU's Strategic Interests and Measures

Having explored the evolving U.S. approach to the war in Ukraine under both the Biden and Trump administrations, now the analysis turns to the EU's reaction which has been widely characterized as unparalleled, showcasing a degree of unity among its member states rarely seen before the war³³⁹. In fact, both the EU and its individual members undertook exceptional measures aimed at supporting Ukraine and its people, diminishing Russia's capabilities, and reinforcing Europe's overall security architecture³⁴⁰. Indeed, these actions encompassed the provision of military, financial, and humanitarian support to Kyiv. At the institutional level, the EU activated an unprecedented array of policy instruments in response to the conflict. Before delving into each of these initiatives in detail, one must first address a fundamental question: how can such a comprehensive and cohesive EU response be explained, given the well-documented structural constraints that have traditionally hindered the effectiveness of EU foreign and security policy³⁴¹?

Arguably, the primary driver of this unprecedented response lies in the geopolitical shock provoked by the large-scale military invasion on European soil and the direct threat it posed to the EU's most immediate and vital security interests³⁴². This rationale is confirmed by the 2022 Strategic Compass, which asserts that *the war on Ukraine is the most serious security crisis in Europe in decades*³⁴³. The strategic shift in Brussels was driven above all by the fear that Russian aggression might not be limited to Ukraine but could extend to NATO and EU members in Eastern Europe, particularly Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Romania³⁴⁴. As emphasized in the White Paper for European Defense, Readiness 2030, *if Russia is allowed to achieve its goals in Ukraine, its*

³³⁸Célia Belin et al., *op.cit.*

³³⁹Giselle Bosse, "The EU's Response to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Invoking Norms and Values in Times of Fundamental Rupture," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 62, no. 5 (December 14, 2023): pag. 1222, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13569>

³⁴⁰Matteo Mazziotti di Celso and Mattia Sguazzini, "The Road to Strategic Autonomy: Reflections from the Russia-Ukraine War," *De Europa* 7, no. 4 (2024): pag. 115, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.13135/2611-853X/11424>

³⁴¹*ibidem*

³⁴²Giselle Bosse, *op.cit.*, pag. 1223

³⁴³"A Strategic Compass - EEAS - European Union," EEAS, pag. 5

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic_compass_en3_web.pdf

³⁴⁴Maryna Rabinovych, "The Russia-Ukraine War: A Watershed Moment for EU Foreign Policy? - Euopp," *EUROPP - European Politics and Policy*, March 23, 2022, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2022/03/23/the-russia-ukraine-war-a-watershed-moment-for-eu-foreign-policy/>

*territorial ambition will extend beyond. Therefore, Russia will remain a fundamental threat to Europe's security for the foreseeable future*³⁴⁵. Ukraine's geographical proximity and increasing alignment with the West have effectively transformed it from a peripheral actor into a pivotal frontier in the EU's security architecture³⁴⁶. In this context, Ukraine acts as a frontline bulwark against further Russian expansionism, while its resistance symbolizes the EU's broader effort to defend democratic norms in its neighborhood. The 2014 annexation of Crimea and subsequent occupation of parts of Donetsk and Luhansk underscored the severe risks of unchecked aggression, further highlighting Ukraine's strategic role in European defense³⁴⁷. Hence, as the White Paper underlined, *Ukraine is currently the frontline of European defense, resisting a war of aggression driven by the single greatest threat to European common security. Ukraine will remain at the frontline of European defense and security and is the key theatre to define the new international order with its own security interlinked with that of the European Union*³⁴⁸. In other words, Ukraine's resistance has been viewed by the EU as not only vital to its own sovereignty, but also essential for the EU's own survival³⁴⁹.

Seen from another but intertwined perspective, the EU's forceful response may also be interpreted as a reaffirmation of its foundational commitment to international law and liberal-democratic values³⁵⁰. The legacy of the 2013–2014 Euromaidan movement strongly influenced this posture, as Ukrainians had clearly signaled their preference for a European future, a choice that President Putin sought to violently reverse³⁵¹. Thus, the invasion became a symbolic affront to the values underpinning the European project³⁵². For many Ukrainians engaged in the conflict, the EU now represents human rights, political freedoms, and liberal democratic values, and they are fighting for a democratic identity anchored in the European and transatlantic community³⁵³. Indeed, central to President von der Leyen's justification for the EU's robust response has been the portrayal of Ukraine as an integral part of Europe's identity: "one of us", "our people", and no longer merely a neighbor

³⁴⁵European Commission, *White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030* (Brussels: European Commission, March 2024), pag. 4, https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6d5db69-e0ab-4bec-9dc0-3867b4373019_en

³⁴⁶Daria Synhaievska, "Why Ukraine Matters: A Security, Political, and Global Perspectives," *UkraineWorld*, January 17, 2025, <https://ukraineworld.org/en/articles/basics/why-ukraine-matters>

³⁴⁷*ibidem*

³⁴⁸European Commission, *op.cit.*, pag. 3; 10

³⁴⁹Rabinovych, *op.cit.*

³⁵⁰Giselle Bosse, *op.cit.*, pag. 1223

³⁵¹Rabinovych, *op.cit.*

³⁵²*ibidem*

³⁵³Milada Anna Vachudova and Nadiia Koval, "Ukraine's Challenge to Europe: The EU as an Ethical and Powerful Geopolitical Actor," *Ethics & International Affairs* 38, no. 3 (2024): pag. 322, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0892679424000364>

but an emerging member of the European family³⁵⁴⁻³⁵⁵. In von der Leyen's words, enabling Ukraine to join the EU is not only in the Union's strategic interest but also "our moral duty".

Beyond grand strategy, the Union's unprecedented measures also have a more tactical logic. Following the Russian invasion, a widespread consensus emerged that the EU must do "whatever it takes" to support Ukraine's self-defense. This denoted a decisive break from the more cautious approach adopted in 2014, when diplomatic overtures and the Franco-German-led Minsk Process formed the backbone of the EU's Russia policy. By contrast, arming Ukraine and granting Kyiv the initiative in negotiating the terms of any future peace deal represented a clear reversal. The argument that the policy of appeasement had catastrophically failed gained significant traction, both in Brussels and across European capitals. It also became a core rationale for the Commission's push for sanctions, which were seen as essential not only for punishing Russian aggression but for preserving the credibility of the EU's prior warnings and red lines³⁵⁶.

Attention must now shift to the responses adopted by the EU. Based on the data compiled by the Ukraine Support Tracker from the Kiel Institute, the total contribution made by the EU and its member states to Ukraine as of 30 June 2025 exceeded €160 billion, including military, financial, humanitarian, and emergency support³⁵⁷.

³⁵⁴Giselle Bosse, *op.cit.*, pag. 1232-1233

³⁵⁵"Speech by President von Der Leyen at the Online Summit of the Crimea Platform, via Videoconference," European Commission, August 23, 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_22_5104

³⁵⁶Giselle Bosse, *op.cit.*

³⁵⁷"Ukraine Support Tracker - A Database of Military, Financial and Humanitarian Aid to Ukraine," Kiel Institute, <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/>

Government support to Ukraine: By country group, € billion

Allocations and commitments January 24, 2022 to June 30, 2025

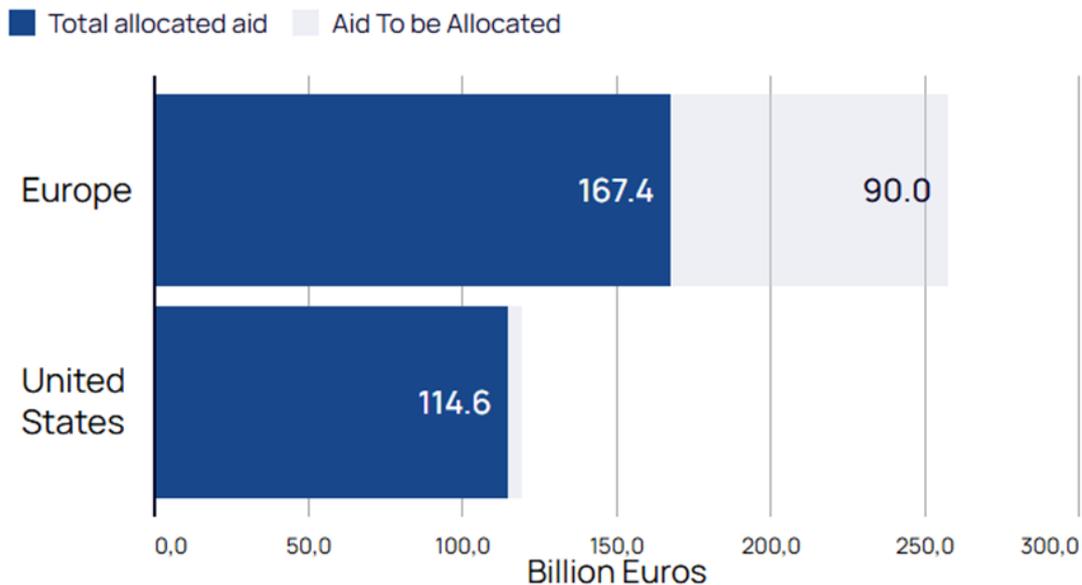


Figure 8. Government support to Ukraine: By country group, € billion. Source: Kiel Institute, 2025³⁵⁸

This evidences that the prevailing narrative portraying the United States as the overwhelmingly dominant donor is not accurate. Among these contributions, EU institutions alone accounted for €84.99 billion, thereby surpassing the individual commitments of any single member state³⁵⁹. In absolute terms, Germany led EU countries with €22.06 billion, followed by Denmark (€8.76 billion), Norway (€7.57 billion), and the Netherlands (€6.21 billion). According to the same data, France ranks eighth (€2.0 billion) and Italy ninth (€1.4 billion). Yet, when assessed in relation to national GDP, Estonia emerges as the leading contributor (3.6% in bilateral aid and 0.5% of EU-provided aid), followed by Denmark (2.4% bilateral, 3% EU share) and Lithuania (1.5% bilateral, 0.5% EU share), confirming the greater responsiveness of Nordic and Baltic countries which perceive a more direct threat from Russia³⁶⁰.

At the institutional level, one of the EU's landmark measures was the adoption of the European Peace Facility (EPF), an innovative off-budget mechanism endorsed by the Council on 22

³⁵⁸Kiel Institute, *op.cit.*

³⁵⁹Matteo Mazziotti di Celso and Mattia Sguazzini, *op.cit.*, pag. 115-116

³⁶⁰*ibidem*

March 2021 and designed to preserve peace, prevent conflict, and enhance global security³⁶¹⁻³⁶². Functionally, the EPF reinforces financial solidarity among member states in the CFSP sphere, offering operational flexibility in addressing external security crises and ensuring consistency in EU external action. Crucially, it enables the Council to adopt CFSP decisions unanimously, pooling national resources into a joint fund to support their implementation. Since the onset of the war, the EPF has rapidly become a key financial vehicle for the EU's military engagement with Ukraine, embodying a decisive shift in the evolution of CFSP and strengthening the EU's defense posture in Europe. The EPF's financial envelope was initially set at €5.692 billion (2021–2027), marking the largest allocation in CSDP history, though still a scaled-down figure compared to the original proposal of €10.5 billion. In response to the conflict, the ceiling then was significantly increased to €17 billion by 2024. Of this, around €11.5 billion has been channeled into military support for Ukraine, and since 28 February 2022, Ukraine has become the first recipient of lethal weapons in EU history under EPF provisions. Indeed, over €3.3 billion of this aid has specifically financed lethal arms, out of a broader €6.1 billion earmarked for such equipment. However, the EPF allows for constructive abstention by member states in the adoption of Council decisions on lethal weapon transfers to third countries. Hungary has notably exercised this option on every occasion, including its abstention on the Ukraine Assistance Fund (UAF) in March 2024. While this weakens the cohesion of CFSP actions, abstaining member states are nonetheless obliged to acknowledge that such decisions bind the Union and must refrain from actions that might obstruct their implementation. Furthermore, those abstaining from lethal weapons transfers are still required to contribute financially to alternative assistance measures, provided they notify the Council accordingly³⁶³.

In parallel, the EU launched the Military Assistance Mission EUMAM Ukraine, a non-executive CSDP military operation established to step up the operational capacity of the Ukrainian Armed Forces³⁶⁴⁻³⁶⁵. The mission's core objective is to enable Ukraine to defend its territorial integrity within internationally recognized borders, uphold its sovereignty, and protect its civilian population. As emphasized by then High Representative Borrell, EUMAM UA *is not just a training mission but a clear proof that the EU will stand by Ukraine for as long as is needed*³⁶⁶. Formalized on 17 October 2022 and activated a month later, the initiative was a direct response to Kyiv's request

³⁶¹Davide Genini, "How the War in Ukraine Has Transformed the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy," *Yearbook of European Law*, April 11, 2025, pag. 6-10, <https://doi.org/10.1093/yel/yeaf003>

³⁶²"European Peace Facility", European Council, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/european-peace-facility/>

³⁶³Davide Genini, *op.cit.*

³⁶⁴Davide Genini, *op.cit.*, pag. 10-12

³⁶⁵"EU Military Assistance Mission in Support of Ukraine," EEAS, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eumam-ukraine_en?s=410260

³⁶⁶Davide Genini, *op.cit.*, pag. 11

for comprehensive military training. Hence, the significance of EUMAM UA becomes apparent: it consolidates the training capabilities and military expertise of member states into an EU-wide program that complements and coordinates national efforts. As the first EU land-based military mission and the most ambitious training effort ever launched under the CSDP, EUMAM UA has positioned the Union as the leading global provider of military training to Ukraine. Since its inception, it has trained over 75,000 Ukrainian personnel, well beyond the initial target of 15,000. Owing to its success, the Council has extended the mission's mandate until November 2026³⁶⁷.

On the financial front, a historic agreement was reached on 1 February 2024, when all 27 EU heads of state approved a €50 billion support package through the Ukraine Facility, a newly created funding mechanism comprising €33 billion in loans and €17 billion in grants for the 2024–2027 period³⁶⁸⁻³⁶⁹. This aid will be disbursed over four years and, unlike earlier assistance programs, is financed directly by member state contributions rather than via capital markets while the grants component will be drawn from the revised 2021–2027 Multiannual Financial Framework. Significantly, the Facility will also be financed through profits generated from frozen Russian assets, marking an unprecedented precedent. Significantly, while humanitarian and military support often originated from member states, the bulk of this macro-financial assistance is delivered through EU institutions, further underlining the centrality of Brussels in steering and coordinating Europe's response to the war³⁷⁰.

From an economic standpoint, the EU has enacted its most extensive and stringent sanctions regime ever imposed on a third country³⁷¹. In addition to the two initial sanction packages adopted in 2014, the EU introduced eighteen further rounds of restrictive measures against Russia following the escalation of the conflict in 2022. As argued by several analysts, these sanctions constitute the strongest foreign policy action ever taken by the EU in response to a single event, aiming to pressure Moscow into halting its aggression by systematically undermining its economic foundations. As a result, Russia has been deprived of an estimated €400 billion in revenue that could have been used to sustain its military operations in Ukraine. Crucially, the EU has made clear that sanctions will not be automatically lifted with the war's conclusion. Instead, their removal is conditional upon Russia's return to the core principles enshrined in the UN Charter and the 1975 Helsinki Final Act. Furthermore, measures involving the confiscation of Russian assets will remain in place until adequate reparations are paid to Ukraine. This framing illustrates how the EU sees the lifting of

³⁶⁷Davide Genini, *op.cit.*, pag. 10-12

³⁶⁸Matteo Mazziotti di Celso and Mattia Sguazzini, *op.cit.*, pag. 117

³⁶⁹ "European Peace Facility", European Council, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/european-peace-facility/>

³⁷⁰Matteo Mazziotti di Celso and Mattia Sguazzini, *op.cit.*, pag. 117

³⁷¹Davide Genini, *op.cit.*, pag. 16-20

sanctions not merely as a legal matter tied to the end of the war, but rather as a political decision to diminish Russia's economic strength while simultaneously reaffirming the rules-based international order in Europe. To date, 1898 individuals, including President Putin and his inner circle, and over 543 entities have been targeted, resulting in more than 2400 listings. The sanctions include travel bans, asset freezes worth over €24.9 billion, and sweeping restrictions across sectors such as finance, trade, transport, energy, and media. Russian banks have been excluded from the SWIFT system, transactions with the Central Bank banned, and Russian transport on EU territory prohibited. Several Kremlin-aligned media outlets have also been suspended to counter disinformation. In energy, once Russia's key revenue source, the EU has drastically reduced dependence: it imposed a near-total embargo on Russian oil imports, introduced a price cap mechanism in coordination with the G7, and banned liquefied natural gas imports. A diversification strategy followed, with the United States and Norway emerging as new principal suppliers. As a result, Russian gas imports fell from over 40% of the EU's total in 2021 to approximately 8% by 2023. Broader trade flows were also sharply curtailed: imports from Russia dropped by 58% and exports by 48%, reflecting comprehensive bans on military equipment, dual-use goods, raw materials, luxury products, diamonds, and various services. Building on the G7 statement and the European Council conclusions from December 2023, the EU also agreed to transfer the extraordinary profits generated by frozen Russian Central Bank assets to support Ukraine. The Council will review the enforcement of these sanctions annually, drawing on biennial reports from the Commission. Legally, the EU maintains that these windfall profits do not constitute sovereign assets and are thus not shielded by international protections on state property³⁷². Critics have nonetheless pointed out that despite their scale, sanctions have not triggered regime change in Russia, and the Kremlin has managed to partly mitigate their effects, most interestingly by redirecting oil exports from Western Europe to other markets via the so-called "shadow fleet"³⁷³. However, it is undeniable that Western sanctions have had a marked impact on Russia's economy: after three years of war, its GDP is 10–12% below pre-war projections, and personal disposable income has declined by 20–25%³⁷⁴.

Finally, on the humanitarian front, EU institutions and member states have provided a total of €9.05 billion in assistance, with €6.84 billion coming from national budgets and €2.21 billion from EU-level funds. Additionally, the EU was quick to invoke the Temporary Protection Directive,

³⁷²Davide Genini, *op.cit.*

³⁷³Erika Szyszczak, "Sanctions Effectiveness: What Lessons Three Years into the War on Ukraine?," Economics Observatory, August 18, 2025, <https://www.economicsobservatory.com/sanctions-effectiveness-what-lessons-three-years-into-the-war-on-ukraine>

³⁷⁴*ibidem*

granting displaced Ukrainians temporary residency and access to essential services within the Union³⁷⁵.

Taken together, these measures exhibit an exceptional degree of unity among EU member states in responding to the Russian invasion³⁷⁶. While support for Ukraine does not feature equally in the political agendas of all member states, it continues to enjoy high levels of public backing across the continent. Although internal divergences and delays, particularly those caused by Hungary, have surfaced, the EU has consistently succeeded in adopting new assistance packages. In contrast to the United States, where aid disbursements have largely stalled, European support for Ukraine has not only persisted but steadily expanded in scope and scale³⁷⁷.

3.1.3 China's Response to the War in Ukraine: Between Moscow and the EU

In assessing the EU's differentiated foreign policy approach towards China, it is crucial to examine Beijing's stance on the war in Ukraine³⁷⁸. Strikingly, the Russian invasion in February 2022 took place merely twenty days after President Xi and President Putin issued a sweeping joint declaration underscoring a “no limits” strategic partnership³⁷⁹. The temporal proximity between the February 4th statement and the February 24th invasion of Ukraine immediately thrust China into the spotlight of a major European war and one of the most consequential geopolitical events since the Cold War's end. This sequence of events spurred a wave of scrutiny among international analysts and decision-makers seeking to decipher the implications of China's rhetoric and behavior for its broader strategic orientation³⁸⁰.

To understand the nature of China's response, it is instructive to contrast it with its posture during Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014³⁸¹. At that time, Beijing's reaction was more reserved and measured, characterized by a sober tone and abstentions in key UN Assembly votes. China neither

³⁷⁵Kristi Raik et al., “EU Policy towards Ukraine: Entering Geopolitical Competition over European Order,” *The International Spectator* 59, no. 1 (January 2, 2024): 51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2023.2296576>

³⁷⁶Matteo Mazziotti di Celso and Mattia Sguazzini, *op.cit.*, pag. 119

³⁷⁷*ibidem*

³⁷⁸Evan Medeiros, “China's Strategic Straddle: Beijing's Diplomatic Response to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine,” *CLM*, June 1, 2022, pag. 1-5, <https://www.prcleader.org/post/china-s-strategic-straddle-beijing-s-diplomatic-response-to-the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine>

³⁷⁹“Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development”, February 4, 2022, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Translations/2022-02-04%20China%20Russia%20joint%20statement%20International%20Relations%20Entering%20a%20New%20Era.pdf>

³⁸⁰Evan Medeiros, *op.cit.*

³⁸¹*ibidem*

overtly supported Russia's actions nor extended immediate economic aid, which later materialized mainly through opportunistic investment deals favoring Chinese interests. Beijing also refrained from any form of military support. As Gabuev, Director of the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center has argued, the 2014 crisis offered Beijing a strategic opening to tilt the balance of power in its favor, effectively positioning Russia as the junior partner in their bilateral relationship³⁸².

In sharp contrast, China's reaction to the 2022 invasion has been distinguished by a markedly assertive tone and consistent anti-American undertones³⁸³. From the outset of the war, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs pointedly avoided labeling the conflict as an "invasion" or attributing blame to Russia for violating Ukraine's sovereignty. Instead, it repeatedly emphasized that NATO and the United States had provoked Moscow and were perpetuating the conflict by supplying Ukraine with weapons. Beijing's position, while couched in vague references to the UN Charter and the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity, has conspicuously lacked acknowledgment of the internal contradictions in its stance. Official condemnations of US policy by both government representatives and state media have been frequent and intense³⁸⁴. A notable early example came on February 24, 2022, when Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua criticized NATO's legitimacy by invoking the historical memory of the Eight-Nation Alliance's invasion of China in 1900, and then citing the 1999 NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade: "NATO still owes the Chinese people a debt of blood"³⁸⁵. She concluded: *even today, China still faces a realistic threat from the US flanked by its several allies*³⁸⁶.... This tone has endured, with China's main state media organs, including the People's Daily and PLA Daily, continuing to publish strident critiques of the United States and NATO. Senior officials have reinforced this messaging. In a virtual dialogue with twenty international think tanks, then First Vice Foreign Minister Le stated: *basically, the United States wants to profit from the war and control Europe, weaken Russia and sustain their hegemonic power at the expense of Ukraine. So, they are killing many birds with one stone, and that explains why they keep doing it*³⁸⁷. General Secretary Xi echoed this framing as well in a June 2022 speech at the BRICS

³⁸²Alexander Gabuev, "A 'Soft Alliance'? Russia-China Relations After the Ukraine Crisis", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, February 2015, pag. 1-11, [https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/ECFR126 - A Soft Alliance Russia-China Relations After the Ukraine Crisis.pdf](https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/ECFR126_-_A_Soft_Alliance_Russia-China_Relations_After_the_Ukraine_Crisis.pdf)

³⁸³Evan Medeiros, *op.cit.*

³⁸⁴*ibidem*

³⁸⁵"Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on February 24, 2022," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, February 24, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202202/t202202_224_10645282.html

³⁸⁶*ibidem*

³⁸⁷"Acting on the Global Security Initiative to Safeguard World Peace and Tranquility," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, May 6, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjbxw/202205/t20220506_10682621.html

Business Forum, claiming that the crisis in Ukraine stemmed from “expanding military alliances and hegemonism”³⁸⁸.

Over time, Beijing’s rhetorical strategy has evolved in subtle but revealing ways. First, Chinese leaders have rejected the label “neutral”, instead describing their position as “objective and impartial,” a formulation introduced by Foreign Minister Wang³⁸⁹. For instance, during a meeting with President Biden at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum in Lima, Xi insisted that China’s position was “open and candid”, not neutral³⁹⁰. Secondly, Chinese officials have consistently called for peace and dialogue in high-level engagements, while refraining from any criticism of Russian military actions³⁹¹. Third, an emerging theme in official statements is that NATO now constitutes a threat to the Asia-Pacific region. This has included warnings about the emergence of an “Asian NATO” and increasing references to U.S. alliances in the region.

Taken together, China’s diplomatic posture can be encapsulated in a threefold strategy of denial, deflection, and diversion. Beijing denies Russia’s culpability for the war and rejects any implication of its own involvement beyond a potential mediating role. It deflects responsibility by emphasizing NATO expansion and U.S. foreign policy as the root causes of the conflict. And it seeks to divert international focus away from Russian aggression by warning of broader security and economic risks allegedly generated by US hegemony³⁹².

However, China’s posture vis-à-vis the war in Ukraine reveals a precarious diplomatic balancing act³⁹³. While it is bound by a deepening strategic partnership with Russia, Beijing simultaneously sustains extensive ties with states supporting Ukraine, most notably the EU and its member states, and aspires to uphold its image as a responsible global power committed to sovereignty and territorial integrity³⁹⁴. In essence, Beijing’s approach is shaped by the need to reconcile three objectives: preserving its alignment with Moscow, safeguarding the foundational principles of Chinese foreign policy, and maintaining stable relations with Europe³⁹⁵. This attempt to

³⁸⁸“China’s Position on Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine,” U.S.- CHINA | ECONOMIC and SECURITY REVIEW COMMISSION, August 31, 2025, <https://www.uscc.gov/research/chinas-position-russias-invasion-ukraine>

³⁸⁹“State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 7, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202203/t20220308_10649559.html

³⁹⁰U.S.- CHINA | ECONOMIC and SECURITY REVIEW COMMISSION, *op.cit.*

³⁹¹Evan Medeiros, *op.cit.*

³⁹²*ibidem*

³⁹³You Xu and Xiru Zhao, “China’s Discursive Strategic Neutrality Position in the Russo-Ukrainian War: Insights from China’s Strategic Narratives,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, March 20, 2025, pag. 1-2,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2025.2479019>

³⁹⁴*ibidem*

³⁹⁵Evan Medeiros, *op.cit.*

manage what could be termed a strategic “trilemma” has been central to China’s diplomatic calculus since the outbreak of hostilities in 2022³⁹⁶.

Yet, to date, China’s overriding priority has been to preserve and even deepen its strategic alignment with Russia, despite the reputational costs associated with Moscow’s actions in Ukraine. From Beijing’s perspective, the war in Ukraine serves certain strategic interests³⁹⁷. During the 13th EU–China HLSD in Brussels on July 2, 2025, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang reportedly stated to EU HR Kallas that “China cannot afford for Russia to lose the war in Ukraine”, attributing this to concerns that the conclusion of the conflict could prompt the United States to pivot its full strategic focus toward China, particularly in the Indo-Pacific and over Taiwan. Wang’s remarks offered a rare glimpse into Beijing’s strategy, revealing that the preservation of Russian stability is seen as essential to China’s broader geopolitical positioning by linking the European theater to China’s Indo-Pacific security environment. However, the precise meaning of a “Russian defeat” remains ambiguous from Beijing’s perspective. Unlike President Putin, whose conception of defeat is likely tethered to the loss of occupied Ukrainian territories, China interprets the issue predominantly through a geopolitical lens. A Russian defeat, for Beijing, would entail an emboldened NATO presence along Russia’s borders, the erosion of a critical strategic partner, and a reinforcement of perceived U.S. global dominance. Such developments would not only solidify American leadership but could also extend Washington’s leverage in Asia. Therefore, China’s coordination with Russia is fundamentally underpinned by a shared aspiration to undermine U.S. hegemony and foster a multipolar international order based on new forms of great power relations³⁹⁸.

China’s indirect support for Russia, while falling short of direct military assistance, is nonetheless substantial and multifaceted. Beyond the rhetorical level, two material dimensions further complicate Beijing’s posture.

Firstly, the expanding trade and financial flows between China and Russia have become a lifeline for Moscow’s war-strained economy³⁹⁹. As Western sanctions have steadily curtailed Russia’s access to international markets, its dependence on China has grown markedly. China has become Russia’s fastest-expanding export destination, while Chinese exports to Russia have surged,

³⁹⁶Evan Medeiros, *op.cit.*

³⁹⁷Emanuele Rossi and Enrico Maria Fardella, “China’s Strategic Outlook on Ukraine and Global Equilibrium: A Dive into Beijing’s Pro-Russian Neutrality,” *chinaobservers*, August 22, 2025, <https://chinaobservers.eu/chinas-strategic-outlook-on-ukraine-and-global-equilibrium-a-dive-into-beijings-pro-russian-neutrality/>

³⁹⁸*ibidem*

³⁹⁹Natalie Sabanadze et.al., *China-Russia Alignment: A Threat to Europe’s Security* (Berlin, Germany: MERICS, 2024), pag. 9-12, https://merics.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/Chatham%20House%20GMF%20MERICS%20Report%20ChinaRussia%20alignment_06-2024-02.pdf

effectively replacing goods previously sourced from Europe and other sanctioning states. Among industrialized economies, China stands alone in maintaining unrestricted trade with Russia⁴⁰⁰. Data illustrates that bilateral trade between the two nations has not only continued to grow steadily over the past decade but has sharply accelerated since the invasion.



Figure 9. Development of monthly bilateral trade volumes since 2019. Source: Merics, 2025⁴⁰¹

In 2024, total trade volume reached USD 245 billion, more than twice the figure recorded in 2020. While the overall trade balance has remained relatively even in value, it is structurally asymmetric in terms of content. Russia exports primarily fossil fuels and raw materials, while China supplies manufactured goods such as vehicles, machinery, electronics, and other consumer products. Indeed, Russia’s energy exports form the cornerstone of this economic relationship⁴⁰². Since 2022,

⁴⁰⁰Natalie Sabanadze et.al., *op.cit.*

⁴⁰¹“China-Russia Dashboard: Facts and Figures on a Special Relationship,” Merics, September 5, 2025, <https://merics.org/en/china-russia-dashboard-facts-and-figures-special-relationship>

⁴⁰²*ibidem*

China has provided a crucial market for Russian fossil fuels, absorbing volumes previously destined for European consumers⁴⁰³.

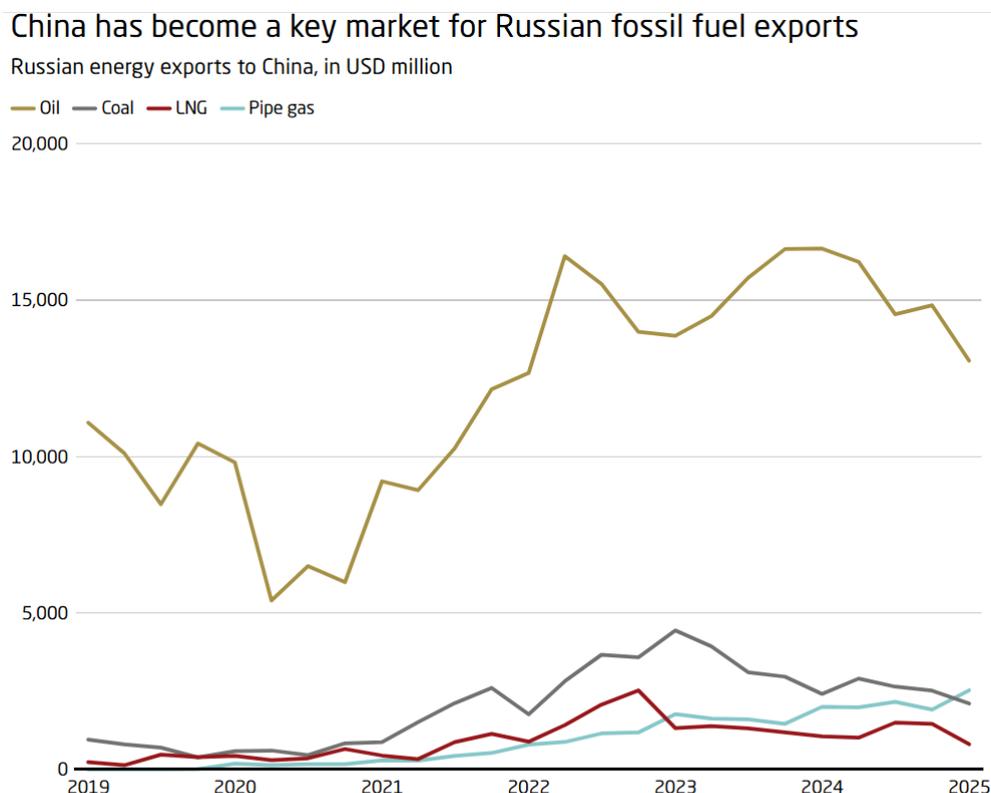


Chart: MERICS. OSW. UI • Source: General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China (GACC)

Figure 10. Russian energy exports to China in USD million. Source: Merics, 2025⁴⁰⁴

Nevertheless, as demonstrated above, the plateauing trade growth observed in 2024 suggests that both political caution and macroeconomic factors are beginning to constrain further expansion. Moreover, the financial value of Russia's energy exports remains highly susceptible to fluctuations in global commodity prices⁴⁰⁵.

The second critical concern surrounding China's role in the war pertains to the export of sensitive dual-use goods to the Russian Federation⁴⁰⁶. A necessary distinction must be drawn between lethal and non-lethal equipment. Since the onset of the invasion, Beijing has consistently refrained

⁴⁰³Merics, *op.cit.*

⁴⁰⁴*ibidem*

⁴⁰⁵*ibidem*

⁴⁰⁶Natalie Sabanadze et.al., *op.cit.*

from transferring lethal weaponry to Moscow, adhering to a red line clearly delineated by both the United States and the EU. Any breach of this threshold would likely trigger a severe escalation in tensions, potentially jeopardizing China's access to its most important export markets. As such, the Chinese leadership has so far shown restraint on this front. However, China has significantly expanded its exports of high-tech equipment and industrial inputs that, although not classified as weapons per se, are deemed crucial for Russia's military manufacturing capabilities. Publicly accessible Chinese customs data indicates that Beijing exports over USD 300 million worth of dual-use goods to Russia every month, many of which have been labelled as "high priority". Among these, the export of machine tools occupies a central role as they are essential for producing advanced weapon systems such ballistic missiles. In 2023, for instance, around 70% of Russian imports of machine tools from China were believed to be used in ballistic missile production. At the same time, Chinese-origin microelectronics are routinely integrated into Russian tanks, aircraft, and other weapon systems. Again in 2023, approximately 90% of Russia's microelectronic imports were reportedly supplied by China, including components critical for military optics mounted on armored vehicles. Additionally, Chinese-manufactured drone engines have been identified as propulsion mechanisms in Russian combat drones⁴⁰⁷.

⁴⁰⁷Natalie Sabanadze et.al., *op.cit.*

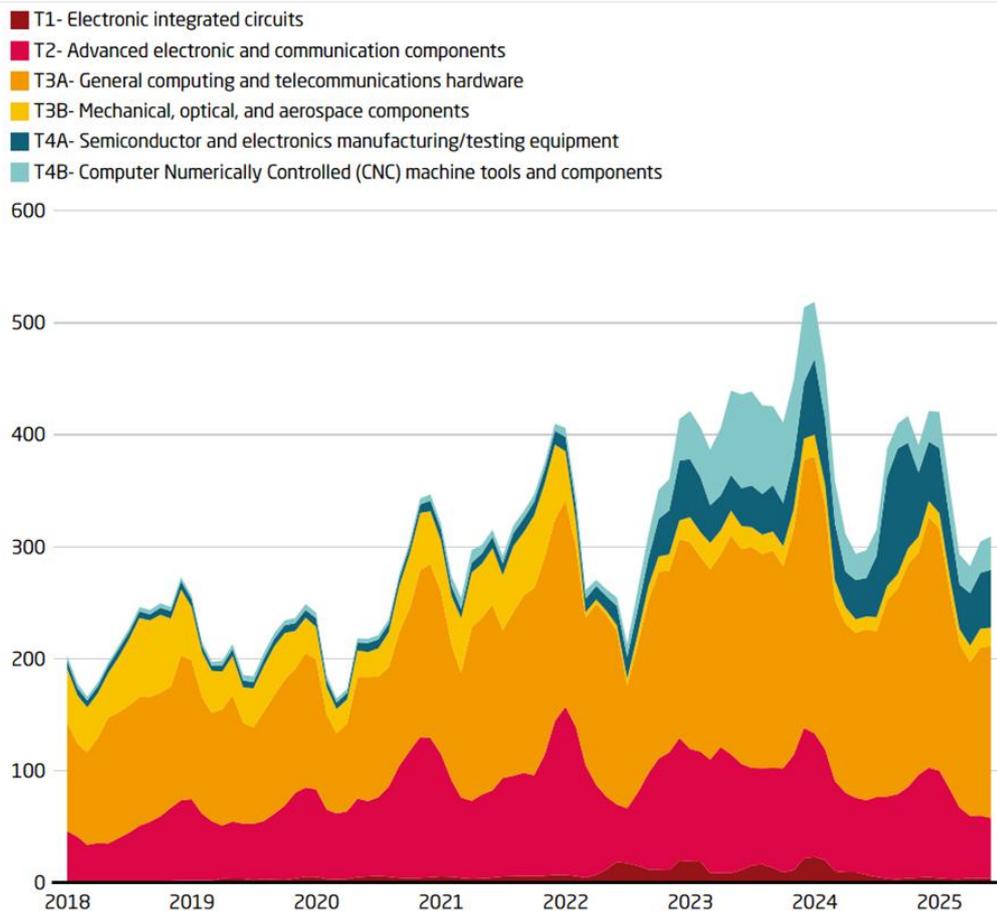


Figure 11. China's monthly exports of goods with civilian-military applications in million USD. Source: Merics⁴⁰⁸

As illustrated by available trade figures, shipments of dual-use goods from China to Russia spiked in late 2021, a surge likely attributable to stockpiling efforts and cyclical production increases. While these exports temporarily dropped following the February 2022 invasion, amid mounting concerns over potential sanctions, they rapidly rebounded and remained consistently elevated throughout 2022 and 2023. A subsequent decline occurred in the aftermath of the U.S. Treasury's December 2023 announcement of prospective secondary sanctions targeting entities facilitating Russia's military-industrial complex. Nevertheless, Chinese dual-use exports resumed their upward trajectory in the second half of 2024, suggesting the implementation of circumvention mechanisms. As a result, total dual-use exports from China to Russia once again exceeded USD 4 billion in 2024⁴⁰⁹. Although a downturn was observed in early 2025, mirroring general trade trends, these flows

⁴⁰⁸Merics, *op.cit.*

⁴⁰⁹Natalie Sabanadze et.al., *op.cit.*

rebounded again in subsequent months. This dynamic has then transformed China into the principal conduit for dual-use technologies destined for Russia's military-industrial base, indirectly facilitating Russia's ability to sustain and scale up its arms production⁴¹⁰.

The second core dimension of China's evolving strategic trilemma lies in maintaining its long-standing posture as a principled defender of territorial integrity, sovereignty, and non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states⁴¹¹. These principles are not merely rhetorical: they constitute what Beijing defines as fundamental national interests, integral to the ideological coherence and internal legitimacy of the CCP⁴¹². Consequently, scholars have emphasized the inherent tension between this normative commitment and China's alignment with Russia amid the Ukraine conflict. In this regard, Professor Feng, a leading specialist on Russia from Peking University, has criticized the expansionist logic underpinning Moscow's actions⁴¹³. He argued that Russia's emphasis on "cultural boundaries" rather than recognized sovereign borders mirrors, in structural terms, Western doctrines that prioritize human rights over sovereignty. Despite the ideological and normative divergence between the two rationales, Feng warns that both justify transgressing state frontiers in the name of overarching values, whether the defense of a perceived civilizational space or the enforcement of universal rights. This convergence, he suggests, presents a fundamental challenge to the non-interference principle. In response, Beijing has repeatedly sought to disassociate itself from such logic. As a matter of fact, it has formally reaffirmed its support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and has refrained from recognizing Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea or the declared independence of the so-called Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics⁴¹⁴.

Finally, the third dimension of China's diplomatic calculus has revolved around its relationship with Europe, particularly the strategic trajectory of EU policy toward China following the outbreak of the war⁴¹⁵. Beijing's principal objectives in this arena have been twofold: to forestall a deterioration of ties with the EU, and to avert the formation of an EU front aimed at countering China. In pursuit of these goals, Chinese diplomacy has intensified its engagement with key EU institutions and national governments, initiating numerous high-level meetings with senior European officials and heads of state. Throughout these diplomatic exchanges, China has employed a carefully calibrated narrative. On one hand, it has softened its prior rhetoric criticizing NATO and the United States, while doubling down on affirmations of its adherence to the principles of sovereignty and

⁴¹⁰Natalie Sabanadze et.al., *op.cit.*

⁴¹¹Evan Medeiros, *op.cit.*

⁴¹²*ibidem*

⁴¹³Emanuele Rossi and Enrico Maria Fardella, *op.cit.*

⁴¹⁴*ibidem*

⁴¹⁵Evan Medeiros, *op.cit.*, pag. 14-16

territorial integrity. On the other hand, Beijing has sought to portray itself as a constructive actor committed to a peaceful resolution, stressing its humanitarian engagement and encouraging Europe to contribute to what it describes as a “balanced, effective, and sustainable European security architecture”. Chinese interlocutors have also consistently called for restraint “on all sides” and advocated for a return to more stable and cooperative EU-China relations. At the same time, Chinese officials have conveyed thinly veiled critiques of the EU’s response to the crisis, urging Brussels to take into account “the legitimate security concerns of all countries”, a reference to Russia’s justifications for the invasion. Moreover, they have called for joint efforts to “mitigate the negative spillover effects” of the war, language interpreted as a plea for easing sanctions. Perhaps most pointedly, China has repeatedly appealed to the EU to uphold its SA, a clear diplomatic signal discouraging alignment with Washington’s former position on the conflict⁴¹⁶.

Despite this multi-pronged diplomatic outreach, however, China’s efforts to influence the EU’s position have yielded limited tangible results thus far.

3.1.4 Naming and Shaming: How the EU Has Reacted to China’s Position on the War

Indeed, from the outset of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the EU has progressively sharpened its language towards China, diplomatically moving from general appeals to responsibility to more explicit demands and, eventually, open criticism.

The first milestone was the EU–China Summit of 2022, held only weeks after the invasion began. At that meeting, the EU leaders urged Beijing to assume a constructive role. For instance, EU former Council President Michel stressed: *we count on China’s support to achieve a lasting ceasefire*⁴¹⁷, while Commission President von der Leyen reminded her counterpart that *any circumvention of our sanctions would prolong the bloodshed*⁴¹⁸. The joint readout thus made clear that the EU expected China not to undermine the effectiveness of its restrictive measures and to use its leverage on Moscow in the interest of peace. By June 2023, EU language had become more prescriptive. The European Council conclusions of 30 June explicitly referred to China, calling on it *to press Russia to stop its war of aggression and to contribute to a comprehensive, just and lasting*

⁴¹⁶Evan Medeiros, *op.cit*

⁴¹⁷“EU-China Summit: Restoring Peace and Stability in Ukraine Is a Shared Responsibility - Consilium,” European Council, April 1, 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/04/01/eu-china-summit-restoring-peace-and-stability-in-ukraine-is-a-shared-responsibility/>

⁴¹⁸*ibidem*

*peace in line with the UN Charter*⁴¹⁹. This marked a qualitative step: the EU was no longer framing China as a potential facilitator of peace, but as a power that could bear responsibility for influencing Russia's behavior. Later that year, then HR Borrell reported after his October visit to Beijing that he had *insisted on the need for China not to support militarily Russia, and that China cannot deliver it arms*⁴²⁰. This formulation therefore combined recognition of existing limits with an explicit conditionality: the EU expected China to refrain from crossing a threshold that would make it an active enabler of Moscow's war effort. The EU–China Summit of 2023 then crystallized this approach into three recurring demands: according to the official readout, the EU *urged China to use its influence on Russia to stop its war of aggression, to refrain from supplying lethal weapons, and to prevent any attempts to circumvent or undermine EU sanctions*⁴²¹. These three imperatives—leverage, restraint, and compliance—became the core of the EU's discourse towards Beijing in the following months. In 2025, with the appointment of Kallas as HR, the EU's rhetoric hardened further. At the 13th EU–China HLSD in Brussels Kallas issued her strongest statement to date: *Russia's war in Ukraine is being sustained by Chinese support*⁴²². This constituted another significant departure from the more cautious language of her predecessor, demonstrating that the EU now views Beijing not merely as a passive bystander but as a factor enabling Moscow's aggression. The same month, at the EU–China Summit of 2025, von der Leyen framed the broader bilateral relationship in stark terms, declaring that *EU–China relations are at an inflection point*⁴²³. Taken together, it is possible to trace a clear evolution. What began in 2022 as an appeal to shared responsibility developed into conditional expectations and, by 2025, into open attribution of responsibility for prolonging the war.

In addition to its political and diplomatic implications, the war in Ukraine has also triggered concrete material consequences in the EU's approach to China in Europe⁴²⁴, particularly through the gradual expansion of restrictive measures targeting Chinese entities, albeit without sanctioning the Chinese state itself. A significant development occurred with the EU's 14th sanctions package against Russia, which included for the first time two major Chinese companies operating in the satellite

⁴¹⁹“European Council Meeting Conclusion”, European Council, 30 June, 2023, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7-2023-INIT/en/pdf>

⁴²⁰“China: Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the Joint Press Conference of the EU-China Strategic Dialogue”, EEAS, October 13, 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/china-remarks-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-joint-press-conference-eu-china_en

⁴²¹“24th EU-China Summit: Engaging to Promote Our Values and Defend Our Interests”, European Council, December 7, 2023, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/12/07/24th-eu-china-summit-engaging-to-promote-our-values-and-defend-our-interests/>

⁴²²“College Readout: Press Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Kaja Kallas”, EEAS, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/college-readout-press-remarks-high-representativevice-president-kaja-kallas_en

⁴²³“President von Der Leyen Visits China as the EU and China Mark 50 Years of Diplomatic Relations”, European Commission, July 25, 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ac_25_1912

⁴²⁴Alexandra Hennessy, “The Impact of Russia's War against Ukraine on Sino-European Relations,” *Journal of European Integration* 45, no. 3 (April 3, 2023): pag. 559-575, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2023.2201497>

sector⁴²⁵. According to an investigation of November 2022, more than six months into Russia's full-scale invasion, Wagner Group reportedly signed a contract worth over \$30 million with the Chinese firm Beijing Yunze Technology Co. Ltd for the acquisition and operational use of two high-resolution satellites. The satellites in question were owned by Chang Guang Satellite Technology, a prominent Chinese company which was subsequently added to the EU sanctions list. Another Chinese company, Head Aerospace Technology, was also implicated⁴²⁶. Subsequently, in September 2024, European intelligence assessments indicated with growing confidence that Russia had clandestinely established a program in China for the production and development of combat drones intended for use in Ukraine⁴²⁷. Despite Beijing's official denials, these revelations prompted the EU to adopt more robust measures. In its 15th package of sanctions, the EU for the first time imposed comprehensive individual sanctions, including asset freezes, travel bans, and prohibitions on the provision of financial resources, on a number of Chinese entities accused of supplying drone components and microelectronics used in Russia's war effort⁴²⁸. In response, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao reaffirmed Beijing's opposition to unilateral sanctions not authorized by the UN Security Council and insisted that China had not supplied weapons to any party in the conflict⁴²⁹. Moreover, she reiterated China's strict controls over the export of dual-use goods, including civilian drones, and its opposition to their military application⁴³⁰. The escalation continued with the EU's 18th sanctions package, which extended restrictions to two small Chinese banks located near the Sino-Russian border, Suifenhe Rural Commercial Bank and Heihe Rural Commercial Bank, on the grounds of their alleged support to the Russian military sector⁴³¹. In retaliation, the Chinese authorities announced countermeasures against two Lithuanian banks, UAB Urbo Bankas and AB Mano Bankas, barring them from engaging in financial transactions or cooperative activities with any Chinese institutions or individuals⁴³².

⁴²⁵"EU Hits 19 Chinese Firms with Sanctions over Links to Russian War Effort," *France 24*, June 25, 2024, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20240625-eu-hits-19-chinese-firms-with-sanctions-over-links-to-russian-war-effort>

⁴²⁶*ibidem*

⁴²⁷Dmytro Basmat, "EU Has 'convincing' Evidence of Reported Chinese Attack Drone Production for Russia, Media Reports," *The Kyiv Independent*, November 16, 2024, <https://kyivindependent.com/eu-china/>

⁴²⁸"Russia's War of Aggression against Ukraine: EU Adopts 15th Package of Restrictive Measures", Council of the European Union, December 16, 2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/12/16/russia-s-war-of-aggression-against-ukraine-eu-adopts-15th-package-of-restrictive-measures/>

⁴²⁹U.S.- CHINA | ECONOMIC and SECURITY REVIEW COMMISSION, *op.cit.*

⁴³⁰*ibidem*

⁴³¹Oleksandr Bulin, "Media: Eu Imposes Sanctions on Chinese Banks for the First Time over Russian Aid," July 19, 2025, <https://babel.ua/en/news/119846-media-eu-imposes-sanctions-on-chinese-banks-for-the-first-time-over-russian-aid>

⁴³²"China Targets Two EU Banks, Retaliating to Bloc's Russia Sanctions Package | Reuters", Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-targets-two-eu-banks-retaliating-blocs-russia-sanctions-package-2025-08-13/>

As illustrated, the actions undertaken by the EU until this moment have mainly carried political weight, signaling a symbolic response to the strategic implications of the Sino-Russian partnership on the European continent. While stopping short of a rupture with China, the Union has nonetheless began displaying its determination to uphold its principles by rejecting any compromise that would jeopardize its fundamental security interests.

3.1.5 Beijing's Peace Initiatives: Form Without Substance?

Against this backdrop, a final question naturally arises: has Beijing played any meaningful diplomatic role in the Ukraine conflict thus far?

On the first anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a twelve-point document titled "China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis" where it urged all parties to engage in dialogue to facilitate a gradual de-escalation of the conflict⁴³³⁻⁴³⁴. While affirming a series of broadly acceptable principles, including respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, adherence to international law, rejection of nuclear threats, and the protection of supply chains and global economic stability, the text offered no concrete implementation mechanisms and was widely perceived as lacking operational substance⁴³⁵. Notably, the proposal displayed a clear alignment with Russian narratives, expressing opposition to "expanding military blocs", denouncing a "Cold War mentality", and rejecting any unilateral sanctions not authorized by the UN Security Council. The document conspicuously avoided referring to the conflict as a war, refrained from calling for the withdrawal of Russian troops, and made no mention of accountability for war crimes⁴³⁶. For these reasons, the peace plan was swiftly dismissed by the EU, which regarded it as a political initiative grounded in a partial and selective reading of international law⁴³⁷. In addition to this initiative, China's Special Representative for Eurasian Affairs Li has undertaken repeated diplomatic missions to Ukraine, Russia, and other concerned countries to advocate Beijing's position although without any significant progresses.

⁴³³"Full Text: China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis," Xinhua, February 24, 2024, <https://english.news.cn/20230224/f6bf935389394eb0988023481ab26af4/c.html>

⁴³⁴U.S.- CHINA | ECONOMIC and SECURITY REVIEW COMMISSION, *op.cit.*

⁴³⁵Richard Weitz, "Assessing China's Ukraine Policy at Year Three," *CHINAUSFocus*, April 5, 2024, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/assessing-chinas-ukraine-policy-at-year-three>

⁴³⁶*ibidem*

⁴³⁷Jorge Liboreiro, "China's Peace Plan Blurs Roles of Aggressor and Victim, Says Brussels," *euronews*, February 24, 2023, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/02/24/chinas-peace-plan-for-ukraine-is-selective-and-blurs-roles-of-aggressor-and-victim-says-br/#%5Ch>

Finally, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang, together with his Brazilian counterpart Vieira, co-chaired a meeting at UN headquarters in New York in 2024 to launch the “Friends of Peace” group on the Ukraine crisis⁴³⁸⁻⁴³⁹. This initiative brought together representatives from several Global South countries and was framed as a vehicle to promote a ceasefire and achieve a sustainable peace in the words of Wang⁴⁴⁰. However, the strategic rationale underpinning this effort appears primarily aimed at amplifying China’s diplomatic leverage in the Global South⁴⁴¹. Indeed, in contrast to its largely reactive posture toward the United States, Russia, and Europe, China’s diplomacy in the developing world has been largely proactive. By swiftly recognizing the neutrality adopted by much of the Global South, Beijing has sought to exploit it as a geopolitical opportunity. This involved tailoring its messaging to resonate with local concerns, such as the denunciation of block-based politics, the critique of unilateral Western sanctions, and the call for reforms in global governance structures. In particular, China has also framed the war’s economic fallout, ranging from food insecurity to inflation and supply chain disruptions, as the direct consequence of Western coercive measures⁴⁴².

Taken together, China’s diplomatic efforts concerning the Ukraine conflict have thus far fallen short of European expectations⁴⁴³. While Beijing continues to float the possibility of playing a constructive mediating role, such initiatives have so far appeared more as instruments to deflect criticism than as genuine efforts to broker peace⁴⁴⁴. That said, given China’s centrality to the evolving global balance of power, its potential role in the future of Ukraine cannot be definitively ruled out.

3.2.1 The Indo-Pacific: Origins and Competing Geopolitical Conceptions

While the war in Ukraine has exposed the limits of the EU’s ability to cooperate with China and has led to increasing political friction, the Indo-Pacific presents a different environment, one where the EU sees room for cooperation with Beijing⁴⁴⁵. Unlike the security dilemma generated by

⁴³⁸“Joint Communique,” 中华人民共和国外交部, September 28, 2024,

https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202409/t20240928_11499659.html

⁴³⁹U.S.- CHINA | ECONOMIC and SECURITY REVIEW COMMISSION, *op.cit.*

⁴⁴⁰Nataliya Butyrska, “Behind the Table: China’s Role in the Ukraine Peace Push,” *chinaobservers*, August 21, 2025,

<https://chinaobservers.eu/behind-the-table-chinas-role-in-the-ukraine-peace-push/>

⁴⁴¹Evan Medeiros, *op.cit.*, pag. 16-18

⁴⁴²*ibidem*

⁴⁴³ Pavel Baev et al., “Should China Have a Role in Ending the War in Ukraine?,” *Brookings*, April 1, 2025,

<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/rivals-and-responders-the-us-china-and-global-crisis-management/>

⁴⁴⁴*ibidem*

⁴⁴⁵Vaimiti Goin, “The Indopacific Space, a Geopolitical Concept with Varying Geometry in a Field of Competing Powers”, *Géococonfluences*, October 2021, <https://geoconfluences.ens-lyon.fr/programmes/dnl/dnl-hg->

the Russian aggression in Europe, the Indo-Pacific allows for a more flexible approach, enabling the Union to pursue its strategic interests and to maintain open channels with China. In this context, understanding the nature of the Indo-Pacific concept and the various strategies surrounding it is essential to grasp the logic of the EU's engagement⁴⁴⁶.

The notion of the “Indo-Pacific” initially emerged within the field of marine biogeography, where it referred to the tropical and subtropical marine ecosystems spanning the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific⁴⁴⁷. It was only in the early 2000s that the term began to acquire a geopolitical and geoeconomic significance, mirroring a broader systemic shift in the center of global gravity from the Atlantic axis toward the Pacific basin. This realignment, already observable since the mid-1980s, coincided with the parallel rise of China and India as regional powers, alongside the expansion of their respective zones of influence. A prominent example of this process has been the Chinese BRI, which has consolidated Beijing's regional and global outreach. Concurrently, the Indo-Pacific has come to be increasingly perceived as a vital geostrategic interface between the United States and China, whose rivalry dominates the regional balance. Yet, despite its growing prominence in international strategic discourse, the spatial contours of the Indo-Pacific remain highly fluid. From a geopolitical perspective, the region is commonly conceptualized as encompassing the coastal zones of Asia and Africa, with China and India acting as pivotal axes, and critical maritime chokepoints such as Singapore and the Strait of Malacca situated at its core. The overlapping definitions found in official strategic documents reveal a “variable geometry” of the concept, reflecting differing interests and interpretations among global actors⁴⁴⁸.

[anglaises/indopacific-space-geopolitics/@openPDF?uid=53b8e208059a4f4cba1563363267c029&id=indopacific-space-geopolitics](https://www.anglaises.com/fr/indopacific-space-geopolitics/@openPDF?uid=53b8e208059a4f4cba1563363267c029&id=indopacific-space-geopolitics)

⁴⁴⁶Vaimiti Goin, *op.cit.*

⁴⁴⁷*ibidem*

⁴⁴⁸*ibidem*

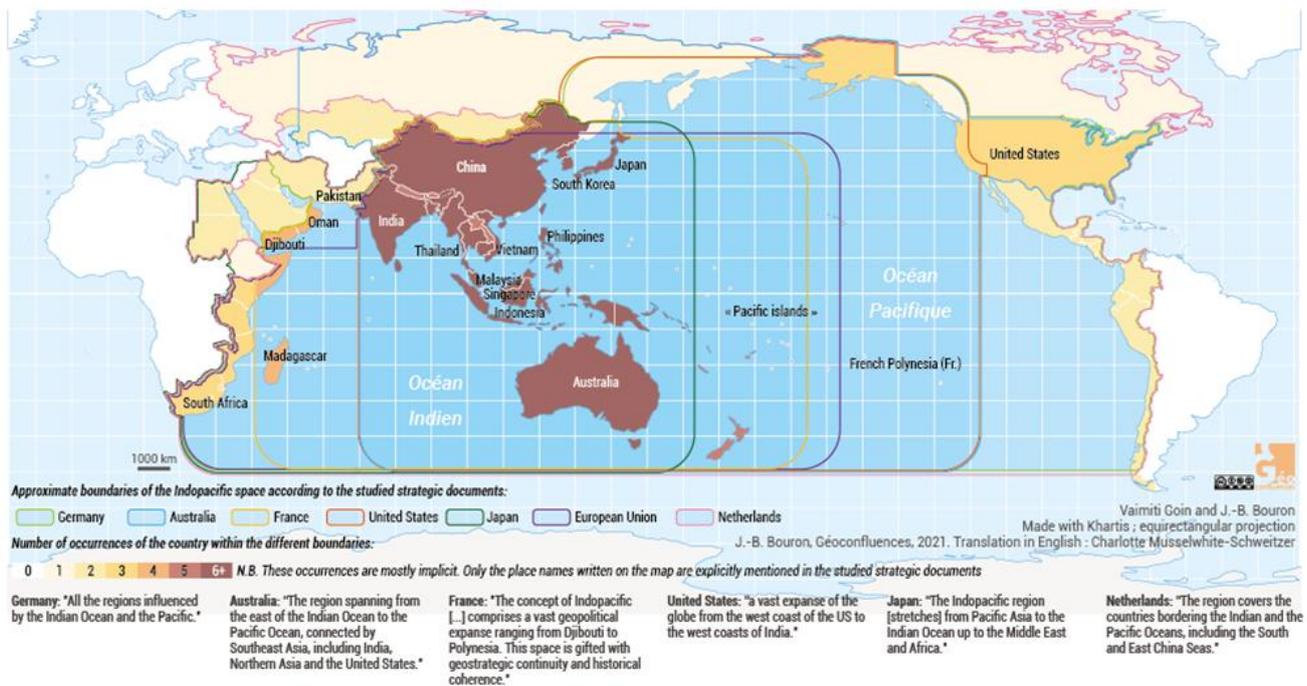


Figure 12. Boundaries of the Indopacific space according to several strategic documents. Source: Goin, 2024⁴⁴⁹

As such, it is clear that the invocation of the Indo-Pacific in foreign policy discourse is far from ideologically neutral⁴⁵⁰. Rather, it tends to reflect divergent strategic outlooks. Three main visions can be identified: one that views the Indo-Pacific primarily through the lens of strategic competition with China; a second that contests the validity or utility of the concept altogether; and a third that envisions an inclusive, rules-based regional order (open to China), intended as a means of avoiding binary alignment and mitigating the escalating Sino-American confrontation⁴⁵¹.

3.2.2 From FOIPS to FONOP: U.S. Containment Strategy in the Indo-Pacific

The United States is the leading exponent of the first interpretation of the Indo-Pacific, one that positions the region as the main theatre of systemic competition with China. Alongside its closest ally, the United Kingdom, Washington has actively worked to consolidate a network of alliances and

⁴⁴⁹Vaimiti Goin, *op.cit.*

⁴⁵⁰*ibidem*

⁴⁵¹*ibidem*

partnerships aimed at counterbalancing Chinese political, economic, and military influence. The strategic relevance of the region was already clear during the Obama presidency, when U.S. foreign policy began to place increasing emphasis on the Indo-Pacific through the reinforcement of diplomatic and military ties with coastal states⁴⁵². This trajectory was not only confirmed but further intensified under the first Trump administration. In a speech, then-Secretary of State Pompeo framed American interests in the region in terms of a shared commitment to “a free and open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP). He stressed that *the United States seek to preserve peace and stability, uphold freedom of the seas in a manner consistent with international law, maintain the unimpeded flow of commerce, and oppose any attempt to use coercion or force to settle disputes. We share these deep and abiding interests with our many allies and partners who have long endorsed a rules-based international order*⁴⁵³. The same centrality was reaffirmed by then-Secretary of Defense Austin, who stated that “the Indo-Pacific is at the heart of American grand strategy,” underscoring the region’s pivotal role in U.S. global priorities⁴⁵⁴. Under the renewed Trump presidency, this approach has taken on an even more assertive tone⁴⁵⁵. The administration has redoubled its commitment to the FOIP strategy, now framed more explicitly through the lens of zero-sum competition with Beijing. As a matter of fact, this recalibrated strategy emphasizes the primacy of immediate American interests and has already been implemented in concrete policy actions, including the expansion of joint naval drills and the imposition of new tariffs on Chinese exports, indicators of a return to a more confrontational posture⁴⁵⁶.

Having clarified the relevance of the Indo-Pacific region across successive U.S. administrations, albeit with nuanced differences, it becomes essential to analyze Washington’s broader strategic posture in the area in order to fully grasp the EU’s own approach to China and the region. Among the highest American priorities lies the preservation and deepening of its military alliances, which have served as the backbone of its Indo-Pacific strategy for over seven decades⁴⁵⁷.

⁴⁵²Michael Devitt, 2014, *The South China Sea: Assessing U.S Policy and Options for the Future*, A CAN Occasional Paper, Arlington, VA: Smith Richardson Foundation, https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA_Files/pdf/iop-2014-u-009109.pdf

⁴⁵³U.S Department of State, “U.S. Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea”, U.S Department of State press statement, July 13, 2020, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-position-on-maritime-claims-in-the-south-china-sea/index.html>

⁴⁵⁴U.S Department of Defense, “Remarks at the Shangri-La Dialogue by Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III (As Delivered)”, June 11, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/3059852/remarks-at-the-shangri-la-dialogue-by-secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iii-a/>

⁴⁵⁵Pierrick Bouffaron and Benjamin Blandin, *The Future of European Influence in the Indo-Pacific*, Schuman Paper No. 786 (Fondation Robert Schuman, 8 April 2025), pag. 1, <https://server.www.robert-schuman.eu/storage/en/doc/questions-d-europe/qe-786-en.pdf>

⁴⁵⁶*ibidem*

⁴⁵⁷Gregory B. Poling, “The United States Is Deeply Invested in the South China Sea”, *Foreign Policy*, August 14, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/08/14/the-united-states-is-deeply-invested-in-the-south-china-sea/>

This structure of alliances dates back to 1947, when the United States signed the Mutual Defense Treaty with the Philippines, a foundational step that was later expanded through additional bilateral treaties with Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and South Korea⁴⁵⁸. A crucial node in this web of strategic partnerships is Taiwan. Although the United States is not legally bound to intervene in the case of a Chinese invasion, there is a widely held expectation that it would provide military support⁴⁵⁹. This expectation is sustained by the policy of “strategic ambiguity”, through which Washington neither confirms nor denies its commitment to defend the island⁴⁶⁰. Nevertheless, the United States continues to provide Taiwan with sophisticated military equipment, in line with the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, which stipulates that *the U.S. shall make available to Taiwan such defense articles and defense services in such quantity as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capacity as determined by the President and the Congress*⁴⁶¹. Indeed, Washington's concern stems from intelligence assessments that China is actively preparing for a forced reunification with Taiwan, while simultaneously developing deterrence strategies aimed at delaying or obstructing potential third-party military intervention, particularly from the United States and its allies⁴⁶². Despite China's long-standing no-first-use nuclear doctrine, U.S. strategic planners consider that Beijing might contemplate the use of nuclear weapons to re-establish deterrence in the event of a conventional defeat that jeopardizes the regime's survival⁴⁶³. In this sense, safeguarding Taiwan's security serves a dual function: it protects an indispensable partner in the global semiconductor supply chain, upon which the U.S. economy heavily depends, and simultaneously reinforces American interests in the broader region⁴⁶⁴. As it is clear, maintaining this intricate alliance system allows the United States to act as a “resident power” in the Indo-Pacific⁴⁶⁵. The forward deployment of U.S. troops in countries such as Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines not only functions as a direct deterrent to perceived Chinese aggression but also ensures that any military response to a potential crisis with China can be rapid and effective. Should the U.S. show signs of retreating from its commitments, regional partners

⁴⁵⁸Gregory B. Poling, *op.cit.*

⁴⁵⁹M. Taylor Fravel and Charles L. Glaser, “How Much Risk Should the United States Run in the South China Sea?”, *International Security* 47, no. 2 (October 2022): pag. 109, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00443

⁴⁶⁰European Parliamentary Research Service, *Briefing: Europe's Strategic Autonomy: Trends, Challenges and Prospects*, (Strasbourg: European Parliament, August 2023), pag. 9, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/751398/EPRS_BRI\(2023\)751398_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/751398/EPRS_BRI(2023)751398_EN.pdf)

⁴⁶¹U.S. Congress, “Taiwan Relations Act”, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/96th-congress/house-bill/2479>

⁴⁶²Tytti Erästö, Fei Su et.al., *Navigating Security Dilemmas in Indo-Pacific Waters: Undersea Capabilities and Armament Dynamics* (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, June 2024), pag. 5, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2024-07/indo_pacific_240701.pdf

⁴⁶³*ibidem*

⁴⁶⁴M. Taylor Fravel et. al., *op. cit.*

⁴⁶⁵Gregory B. Poling, *op. cit.*

might reassess their alignment and drift closer to Beijing, an outcome that would severely damage U.S. credibility and influence⁴⁶⁶.

At the core of this framework thus lies a containment strategy, operationalized through the so-called “island chain strategy” which exploits the region’s unfavorable geography from a Chinese perspective⁴⁶⁷. American strategists identified early on the potential of using successive chains of islands, along with military bases located in allied countries, to restrict China's maritime access and gradually encircle its strategic projection⁴⁶⁸. While there is no single official definition, the first island chain extends from the Kuril Islands in the north, through the Japanese archipelago, the Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, and the northern Philippines, eventually reaching Indonesia and Vietnam⁴⁶⁹. Before delving into the centrality of this first chain, it is worth mapping the second and third chains as well. The second island chain, stretching from Hawaii through Guam to parts of the Western Pacific, acts as a logistical and operational corridor for American forces, facilitating reinforcement and resupply operations in support of allies positioned within the first island chain⁴⁷⁰. Then, the third island chain begins with the Aleutian Islands and proceeds virtually through Hawaii, Samoa, and Fiji, terminating in New Zealand⁴⁷¹. The First Island Chain, in particular, has often been described as a “Great Wall in reverse” from China’s perspective⁴⁷². Unlike the United States, whose bases face the open ocean, China’s maritime access is confined by a dense network of chokepoints, including the Tsushima Strait, the southern Japanese islands, the Bashi Channel between Taiwan and the Philippines, territorial waters between the Philippines and Indonesia, and the crucial Strait of Malacca. In the event of a conflict, these maritime passages could be blocked by states that maintain varying degrees of military cooperation or base agreements with the United States. So long as this configuration persists, China’s goal of transforming the PLAN into a blue-water navy capable of global power projection remains structurally constrained⁴⁷³.

The containment dimension of the U.S. strategy is further reinforced through its participation in minilateral security groupings, most notably the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and the

⁴⁶⁶*ibidem*

⁴⁶⁷Michael M. Gunter, “Chinese Naval Strategy: THE INFLUENCE OF ADMIRAL MAHAN’S THEORIES OF SEA POWER.”, *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues* 24, no. 3 (2020): 64, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48590643>

⁴⁶⁸Michael M. Gunter, *op. cit.*, pag. 65

⁴⁶⁹Lt. Col. Js Sodhi, “Island chain strategy: Steps to checkmate China”, *Financial Express*, June 18, 2022, <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/island-chain-strategy-steps-to-checkmate-china/2565232/>

⁴⁷⁰James J. Writz, “The Maritime Logic of the Melian Dialogue: Deterrence in the Western Pacific”, *Survival* 64, no.6 (3 November, 2022): 49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2022.2143083>

⁴⁷¹James R. Holmes, Toshi Yoshihara, “Command of the Sea with Chinese Characteristics”, *Orbis* 49, no.4 (Autumn 2005): pag- 677-694, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2005.07.008>

⁴⁷²Michael M. Gunter, *op. cit.*, pag. 69-70

⁴⁷³*ibidem*

AUKUS partnership. The QUAD, comprising the United States, Australia, Japan, and India, operates as an informal platform for strategic cooperation in fields ranging from infrastructure development to maritime security in order to offset China's growing influence in the region⁴⁷⁴. Notably, the QUAD does not include a mutual defense clause, setting it apart from formal alliances. Meanwhile, AUKUS, a trilateral pact negotiated in secrecy in 2021 between the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, represents a more explicit counterbalance to Beijing. The agreement includes the sharing of nuclear-powered submarine technology with Canberra, the potential stationing of American bombers on Australian soil, and the development of joint capabilities in cyber, AI, and quantum technologies. The strategic message is clear: by reinvigorating its alliances, Washington intends not only to strengthen its presence in the Indo-Pacific but also to encourage other regional players such as the Philippines or Vietnam to take a firmer stance in the face of China's assertiveness⁴⁷⁵. Alongside these initiatives, the United States is committed to preserving a rules-based order in the region, with particular focus on the principle of freedom of navigation⁴⁷⁶. This commitment is not limited to protecting commercial maritime routes, vital to both East Asian economies and U.S. trade, but extends to ensuring military access and operational maneuverability⁴⁷⁷. In practice, this principle has materialized through Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), conducted by the U.S. Navy in disputed waters⁴⁷⁸. These operations serve a dual purpose: first, to contest Beijing's excessive maritime claims, and second, to challenge China's demands that all military maneuvers within its claimed EEZs require prior notification and approval. The number of such operations has increased significantly in recent years, rising from five or six annually before 2015 to nine in 2019, thereby displaying the mounting tensions in contested maritime domains⁴⁷⁹.

3.2.3 China's Approach to the Indo-Pacific: Sovereignty and Maritime Security

Following the analysis of the American approach, it is essential to outline China's understanding of the Indo-Pacific and its perceived interests in the region. From Beijing's standpoint, the very notion of the Indo-Pacific is inherently ideological and perceived as a geopolitical tool of

⁴⁷⁴Alice Dell'Era, "QUAD e AUKUS: cardini della postura strategica americana nell'Indo-Pacifico", *Geopolitica.info*, April 8, 2022, <https://www.geopolitica.info/quad-aukus-cardini-postura-strategica-americana-indo-pacifico/>

⁴⁷⁵Alice Dell'Era, *op.cit.*

⁴⁷⁶U.S Embassy in Chile, "Kerry at East-West Center on U.S. Vision for Asia-Pacific", 14 August, 2014, <https://cl.usembassy.gov/kerry-east-west-center-u-s-vision-asia-pacific/>

⁴⁷⁷M. Taylor Fravel et. al., *op. cit.*

⁴⁷⁸Madeline McLaughlin, "U.S Strategy in the South China Sea", *American Security Project*, October 1, 2020, pag. 2, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep26608>

⁴⁷⁹*ibidem*

encirclement orchestrated by the United States⁴⁸⁰⁻⁴⁸¹. Specifically, China sees the Indo-Pacific discourse as part of a broader containment strategy, designed to apply military pressure and consolidate alliances intended to marginalize Beijing's influence. As such, Chinese officials and analysts often portray the usage of the term Indo-Pacific as an expression of American imperialism, attempting to impose its geopolitical vision in a space where China is positioned as a systemic adversary⁴⁸².

For instance, consistent with this perception, Beijing maintains that it is committed to a peaceful resolution of disputes in the South China Sea, while denouncing U.S. operations under the banner of freedom of navigation as violations of Chinese sovereignty⁴⁸³. According to the Chinese narrative, such activities seriously endanger not only China's legitimate interests but also its national security, to the extent that Washington is described as "the real threat to regional peace and security"⁴⁸⁴. In response to U.S. FONOPs, China repeatedly insists that it does not oppose the general principle of freedom of navigation or overflight in the South China Sea⁴⁸⁵. The core issue, from Beijing's perspective, lies in the conduct of military operations by U.S. naval and aerial forces in waters that China considers part of its territorial domain. These activities are therefore interpreted as a calculated effort by Washington to pursue maritime hegemony under the guise of upholding international law. China's position is further reinforced by its recurring criticism of the United States for not having ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), despite invoking its principles⁴⁸⁶. As one Chinese academic puts it with deliberate irony, *the U.S. instead makes its own judgments according to its own unilateral understanding and interpretation of the rules. This often gives rise to cases of American international law vs. international law*⁴⁸⁷. Beyond maritime disputes, U.S. involvement in Taiwan is also seen as a deliberate mechanism to contain and weaken China. The continuous supply of lethal weaponry to the island is regarded by the CCP as a direct threat to territorial integrity and to the stability of the motherland⁴⁸⁸.

⁴⁸⁰Vaimiti Goin, *op.cit.*

⁴⁸¹Rory Medcalf, "L'indo-Pacifique Aux Couleurs de La Chine," *Politique Étrangère* Automne, no. 3 (August 29, 2019): pag. 49–61, <https://doi.org/10.3917/pe.193.0049>

⁴⁸²Vaimiti Goin, *op.cit.*

⁴⁸³EMBASSY OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA IN THE REPUBLIC OF INDONESIA, "The US Actually the Real Threat to Regional Peace and Security—Reality Check IV: Falsehoods in US Perceptions of China", June 22, 2022, http://id.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgdt/202206/t20220622_10707647.htm

⁴⁸⁴*ibidem*

⁴⁸⁵Wu Zurong, "U.S Hegemony and Provocations in the South China Sea", CHINA US FOCUS, February 26, 2019, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/article/2019/0226/17800.html>

⁴⁸⁶*ibidem*

⁴⁸⁷Tian Schichen, "The Real Source of Conflict in the South China Sea", CHINA US FOCUS, March 6, 2020, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/the-real-source-of-conflict-in-the-south-china-sea>

⁴⁸⁸Ghazala Yasmin Jalil, "China's Rise: Offensive or Defensive Realism", *Strategic Studies* 39, no. 1 (2019): pag. 55, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48544287>

Nonetheless, while China formally rejects the notion of the Indo-Pacific as a coherent strategic space, its actions increasingly demonstrate a growing awareness and engagement on a regional scale. At the core of China's approach to the Indo-Pacific lies a fundamental interest in safeguarding state sovereignty and territorial integrity, principles that are particularly significant in relation to its claim over Taiwan⁴⁸⁹. The Chinese position is unequivocal: *there is but one China in the world, Taiwan is an inalienable part of China's territory, and the Government of the People's Republic of China is the sole legal government representing the whole of China. The United States, for its part, has been attempting to use Taiwan to contain China. It constantly distorts, obscures and hollows out the one-China principle, steps up its official exchanges with Taiwan, and emboldens "Taiwan independence" separatist activities*⁴⁹⁰. As articulated by Foreign Minister Wang, Taiwan then represents one of China's most pressing security concerns in the Indo-Pacific. Since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, the Chinese leadership has viewed Taiwan as a renegade province, destined to be reunified with the mainland⁴⁹¹. The importance of Taiwan is first and foremost political⁴⁹². Unification is seen as the final chapter in closing a historical period of humiliation and foreign domination, epitomized by the Japanese annexation of Taiwan from 1895 to 1945. Furthermore, bringing Taiwan under PRC control would formally conclude the Chinese civil war. More broadly, President Xi and the CCP have repeatedly linked Taiwan's reintegration to the national objective of achieving "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation"⁴⁹³. In addition to this powerful historical and political symbolism, Taiwan's military importance is paramount⁴⁹⁴. During the Cold War, the island served as a critical base for U.S. intelligence operations against the PRC, a legacy not forgotten in Beijing. Chinese strategists are acutely aware of how their national security would now be compromised should Taiwan fall under the influence of a foreign power. This is why Taiwan is regularly referred to as a "core interest" of the Chinese state. As recently emphasized in Chinese rhetoric, *Taiwan independence, like a highly destructive gray rhino charging toward us, must be resolutely stopped*⁴⁹⁵. Moreover, control over Taiwan is closely linked to China's broader geostrategic

⁴⁸⁹Tytti Erästö, Fei Su et.al., pag. 4

⁴⁹⁰Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China", August 2, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202208/t20220802_10732293.html

⁴⁹¹Klaus Heinrich Raditio, *Understanding China's Behaviour in the South China Sea: A Defensive Realist Perspective* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pag 81-83, https://www.viet-studies.net/kinhte/Understanding_Chinas_Behaviour_in_the_SCS.pdf

⁴⁹²Frédéric Krumbein, "Leaving the Dragon's Shadow – Normative Power Europe and the Emergence of a Taiwan Policy in the EU?" *Journal of European Integration* 46, no. 2 (2023): pag. 171, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2023.2258263>

⁴⁹³*ibidem*

⁴⁹⁴Klaus Heinrich Raditio, *op. cit*

⁴⁹⁵Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Wang Yi: "Taiwan Independence", Like a Highly Destructive "Gray Rhino", Must Be Resolutely Stopped", July 23, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/wshd_665389/202209/t20220924_10771037.html

ambitions in the maritime domain. Without regaining authority over the island, Beijing would face substantial limitations in projecting power across its adjacent seas and establishing itself as a true global superpower. Scholars have gone as far as to describe Taiwan and the South China Sea as “two sides of a coin”: only by consolidating sovereignty over Taiwan could China hope to break through the U.S.-led first island chain; conversely, only by asserting control over the South China Sea could it secure the conditions to reclaim the island⁴⁹⁶. In this sense, Taiwan is considered not merely a domestic issue, but a vital geopolitical hinge. As one analyst put it, *if Taiwan should be alienated from the mainland ... a large area of water territory and rich reserves of ocean resources will fall into the hands of others ... China will forever be locked to the west side of the first chain of islands in the West Pacific*⁴⁹⁷.

A second major interest for China in the Indo-Pacific concerns the safeguarding of its sea lines of communication (SLOCs), which work as vital arteries linking the country to numerous commercial and energy ports around the world⁴⁹⁸. Among Beijing’s primary concerns is the scenario in which, in the event of an armed conflict over Taiwan, the United States could impose a naval blockade that would disrupt the flow of energy and commercial goods transiting through these maritime corridors⁴⁹⁹. This potential vulnerability has pushed Chinese authorities to enhance both the protection and diversification of these strategic routes. China’s dependency on uninterrupted maritime trade has steadily increased over the decades. In 1993, China became a net importer of crude oil⁵⁰⁰; by 2013, it had already overtaken all other countries to become the world’s largest net oil importer⁵⁰¹. Given this structural reliance, any significant disruption of maritime energy flows could pose a severe threat to China’s economic growth and domestic stability⁵⁰². In response, Beijing has pursued a regional maritime strategy poised to consolidate its presence along key points in the Indian Ocean and beyond. This strategy includes the development of so-called “strongpoints” located not only within its own territory but also in proximity to neighboring states such as India. A pivotal analytical framework in this regard was introduced in 2004, the so called “string of pearls strategy.” According to this concept, China has been systematically expanding its naval and logistical reach by investing in civilian maritime infrastructure that can be easily converted to dual-use purposes. This approach

⁴⁹⁶Klaus Heinrich Radtke, *op. cit*

⁴⁹⁷Andrew S. Erickson, Joel Wuthnow, “Barriers, Springboards and Benchmarks: China conceptualizes the Pacific Island Chains”, *The China Quarterly* 225 (March 2016): pag. 1-19, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016000011>

⁴⁹⁸Tytti Erästö, Fei Su et.al., *op.cit*.

⁴⁹⁹*ibidem*

⁵⁰⁰Sergei Trush, “China’s Changing Oil Strategy and Its Foreign Policy Implications,” Brookings, September 1, 1999, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/chinas-changing-oil-strategy-and-its-foreign-policy-implications/>

⁵⁰¹“China surpassed the United States as the world’s largest crude oil importer in 2017”, U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), December 31, 2018, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=37821>

⁵⁰²European Parliamentary Research Service, *op.cit*.

has found its most tangible expression in the BRI. As a matter of fact, Beijing has invested in a network of ports across the Indo-Pacific, particularly in the Indian Ocean, which not only increase regional connectivity but could also serve strategic military functions. These outposts, positioned near key chokepoints, allow China to project power more efficiently and secure influence over the maritime corridors that are essential to its economic and energy lifelines⁵⁰³.

3.2.4 Engaging Without Containing: The EU's Alternative Indo-Pacific Paradigm

Finally, the EU can be situated as a distinct actor within the third interpretative framework of the Indo-Pacific. In recent years, the EU has intensified its involvement in the region, culminating in the adoption of the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific by the Council in April 2021⁵⁰⁴. Accompanied by a Joint Communication outlining the rationale and strategic objectives, this document reflects the Union's recognition of the Indo-Pacific as a critical geopolitical and geo-economic space. As defined in EU discourse, the Indo-Pacific constitutes a broad maritime continuum spanning the Indian and Pacific Oceans and includes key regional actors whose cooperation is vital to upholding international stability and prosperity⁵⁰⁵. Against this backdrop, the EU has gradually articulated a strategic posture that emphasizes engagement, sustainable development, multilateralism, and the reinforcement of a rules-based international order. As the strategy explicitly states, *the EU intends to increase its engagement with the region to build partnerships that reinforce the rules-based international order, address global challenges, and lay the foundations for a rapid, just and sustainable economic recovery that creates long-term prosperity*⁵⁰⁶. Despite some lingering skepticism among regional actors regarding the EU's capacity to act as a genuine strategic partner, empirical analyses indicate growing convergence between the EU's foreign policy priorities and those of Indo-Pacific stakeholders. Indeed, growing concerns within the EU over the risk of conflict-induced disruptions to supply chains and maritime trade routes have only amplified its commitment to regional engagement⁵⁰⁷.

⁵⁰³European Parliamentary Research Service, *op.cit.*

⁵⁰⁴U. Kashyap, "The Revitalized European Union's Strategy on the Indo-Pacific: Shaping the Future through Strategic Engagement," in *Indo-Pacific Strategic Churn*, (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2025), pag. 132-136, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-96-5245-7_8

⁵⁰⁵*ibidem*

⁵⁰⁶"Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific", European Commission, pag. 1, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf.

⁵⁰⁷U. Kashyap, *op.cit.*

This strategic reorientation has frequently been described as a “third way”, one that is neither confrontational nor aligned with zero-sum logic⁵⁰⁸. Instead, the EU promotes a non-threatening approach that is widely perceived in the region as inclusive and partnership-oriented. In this sense, the strategy mirrors the EU’s aspiration for greater SA and its ambition to play a more proactive role in a multipolar world⁵⁰⁹. Rather than contributing to the securitization of the region, the Union seeks to preserve and strengthen the multilateral order in response to growing geopolitical tensions.

A key element of the EU’s approach lies in its explicit willingness to cooperate with all regional actors, including China. As the strategy argues, *the EU will also pursue its multifaceted engagement with China, engaging bilaterally to promote solutions to common challenges, cooperating on issues of common interest and encouraging China to play its part in a peaceful and thriving Indo-Pacific region*⁵¹⁰. In fact, as underscored by Wiegand, Managing Director for Asia and the Pacific at the EEAS, the strategy is “not about competition, but cooperation”⁵¹¹. He also noted that the EU’s interest in the Indo-Pacific stems from a desire for deeper involvement rather than geopolitical rivalry. Therefore, the divergence between the EU and the United States becomes even more evident when comparing the underlying logic of their respective strategies. While the American FOIP framework displays a hegemonic mindset focused on containing China and preserving U.S. primacy, the EU’s strategy places emphasis on multilateral dialogue and functional cooperation. Notably, both the EU strategy and Germany’s Indo-Pacific guidelines abstain from any direct reference to the United States, a choice that illustrates the EU’s desire to maintain an independent and balanced stance⁵¹².

European caution is also evident in the EU’s limited engagement with strategic alliances such as the QUAD⁵¹³. While acknowledging the potential for dialogue on “issues of common interests”, particularly in areas such as climate change, technology, and health, the EU has avoided deeper alignment that could compromise its strategic flexibility⁵¹⁴. So, this approach mirrors broader European concerns over the risks of polarization, which are perceived as potentially detrimental to regional stability and to the EU’s own economic and security interests. In sum, although the EU is

⁵⁰⁸*ibidem*

⁵⁰⁹U. Kashyap, *op.cit.*

⁵¹⁰ “Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific”, European Commission, pag. 4,

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf.

⁵¹¹Giulio Pugliese, “The European Union’s Security Intervention in the Indo-Pacific: Between Multilateralism and Mercantile Interests,” *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 17, no. 1 (2022): 81-82,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2022.2118425>

⁵¹²*ibidem*

⁵¹³“European Union,” Observatory IndoPacific, <https://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/observatory-indo-pacific/eu/>

⁵¹⁴European Commission, *op.cit.*

fully aware of China's assertive behavior, including its military expansion and human rights record, it remains committed to a form of engagement that resists securitization and avoids taking sides in the Sino-American rivalry⁵¹⁵. Although some forms of balancing vis-à-vis China may be acceptable, the EU has made it clear that it does not intend to pursue a strategy of dissociation⁵¹⁶.

To understand the EU's decision to adopt its comprehensive Indo-Pacific strategy, it is essential to consider both internal and external drivers⁵¹⁷. Three EU Member States, France, Germany, and the Netherlands, played a significant role in shaping the broader European engagement with the region. These countries had already formulated their own Indo-Pacific strategies well before the EU's collective initiative, cultivating longstanding diplomatic, economic, and strategic relations with several Indo-Pacific states. Owing to their considerable bilateral influence, their policy choices helped generate momentum for a coordinated EU-wide approach, ultimately pushing Brussels to present a formal and cohesive strategy⁵¹⁸.

Another critical factor behind this strategic shift was the rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific⁵¹⁹. The intensification of regional competition and the rising centrality of the Indo-Pacific in global affairs prompted the EU to revise its traditional Asia-Pacific outlook and adopt a more holistic engagement with the broader Indo-Pacific construct. The region's economic dynamism, characterized by an abundance of natural resources, large consumer markets, and expanding investment opportunities, highlighted the need for the EU to assert its presence in a strategically meaningful way. From an economic standpoint, the Indo-Pacific plays a crucial role in shaping global trade architecture and future growth trajectories. As a matter of fact, the region generates approximately 60% of global GDP and contributes two-thirds of worldwide economic expansion. Its share in the global economy is projected to rise further, reinforcing its importance as a key pillar of global growth. Among the world's four largest non-EU economies (China, India, and Japan), three are located in the Indo-Pacific. The EU, in turn, is the largest investor in the region, underlining the depth of its economic entanglement. Four of the EU's top ten trading partners for goods are also Indo-Pacific countries, namely China, Japan, South Korea, and India. In 2022 alone, over one third of European imports originated from this region, which, taken together with EU

⁵¹⁵Joanne Lin, "2021/164 'the EU in the Indo-Pacific: A New Strategy with Implications for ASEAN' by Joanne Lin," *ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute*, December 16, 2021, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-164-the-eu-in-the-indo-pacific-a-new-strategy-with-implications-for-asean-by-joanne-lin/>

⁵¹⁶*ibidem*

⁵¹⁷U. Kashyap, *op.cit.*

⁵¹⁸*ibidem*

⁵¹⁹Benedetta Girardi et.al., *What the Indo-Pacific Means to Europe: Trade Value, Chokepoints, and Security Risks* (The Hague: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, November 2023), pag.3-5, <https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/What-the-Indo-Pacific-means-to-Europe-Trade-Value-Chokepoints-and-Security-Risks-HCSS-2023.pdf>

exports, accounts for over 70% of global trade in goods and services. This level of interdependence is particularly pronounced in the area of high value-added goods. The EU's manufacturing and industrial competitiveness heavily relies on imports of complex mechanical and electrical equipment from the Indo-Pacific. In 2020, EU imports in this category reached a combined value of \$632.7 billion. Over 70% of Europe's electrical machinery imports came from Indo-Pacific countries, with China, Japan, Vietnam, Malaysia, South Korea, and Taiwan alone accounting for almost 65% of the total. Conversely, the EU is also a major supplier of high-tech goods to the region. Countries such as China, South Korea, and Japan import significant quantities of optical instruments, aerospace components, and related technologies from Europe, with over 40% of total EU exports in these sectors directed towards Indo-Pacific markets. Furthermore, vehicle manufacturing and trade represents another key area of bilateral exchange, with both regions engaged in the reciprocal flow of high value-added vehicles. Trade in medium value-added goods is also significant, albeit less lucrative than in high-end sectors. For instance, more than 40% of the EU's imports of plastics and organic chemicals originate from Indo-Pacific sources. Meanwhile, on the western flank of the region, particularly in the Gulf States, the EU sources essential energy commodities such as crude oil, natural gas, and liquefied natural gas (LNG). In the wake of sanctions on Russian energy, these dependencies are expected to increase. At the same time, the Indo-Pacific remains a vital export destination for European producers. Even low value-added goods play a role in this bilateral economic nexus. Trade in ores, precious metals, iron, and steel, while contributing less to total revenue, remains essential as these materials often serve as indispensable inputs for the production of high-tech finished products such as vehicles, aircraft, and advanced machinery⁵²⁰.

From a geopolitical standpoint, the adoption of a unified Indo-Pacific strategy was also a response to intensifying rivalries in a context of complex global interdependence⁵²¹. As previously noted, the EU has deliberately positioned itself outside the binary logic of great power competition between the United States and China. This aspiration for strategic equidistance was aptly summarized by HR Borrell, who declared that *the world's center of gravity is moving towards the Indo-Pacific, both in geopolitical and geo-economic terms. The futures of the EU and the Indo-Pacific are interlinked*^{522,523}.

⁵²⁰Benedetta Girardi et.al., *op.cit.*

⁵²¹U. Kashyap, *op.cit.*

⁵²²*ibidem*

⁵²³“The EU approach to the Indo-Pacific: Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)”; EEAS, <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-approach-indo-pacific-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-centre-strategic-and-en>

Beyond rhetorical declarations, the EU's strategic approach to the Indo-Pacific has materialized around a set of broad cooperation areas. Yet, a closer analysis of the official documents reveals that the Union's security priorities in the region revolve chiefly around the protection of SLOCs and the promotion of a multilateral, rules-based order, objectives that are also closely linked to the EU's ambition to diversify its economic dependencies⁵²⁴. As explicitly stated in the strategy, *the EU seeks to promote an open and rules-based regional security architecture, including secure sea lines of communication, capacity-building and enhanced naval presence in the Indo-Pacific in accordance with the legal framework established by the UNCLOS. The EU will seek to conduct more joint exercises and port calls with partners, including multilateral exercises, to fight piracy and protect freedom of navigation while reinforcing EU naval diplomacy in the region*⁵²⁵.

Several member states have strong motivations to support such actions⁵²⁶. Economically, the rationale is self-evident: a significant proportion of global trade, especially in high-value goods, traverses the South China Sea, making the security of these maritime routes essential to Europe's economic stability and competitiveness. At a more systemic level, the EU, an entity composed predominantly of small and medium powers, remains deeply invested in preserving the liberal international order from which it has greatly benefited. Were that order to erode in favour of a binary great-power competition between the United States and China, European influence would be dramatically diminished. It is in this context that the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy should be read not as a replication of American logic, but as a calibrated form of hedging, aimed at maintaining strategic flexibility in an increasingly polarized geopolitical environment. The strategy's reference to a "meaningful European naval presence" further reinforces this goal, underlining the intention to coordinate and optimize national deployments through mechanisms such as the Coordinated Maritime Presences (CMP), where participating member states voluntarily share information and strategic assessments, while retaining full national command over their assets⁵²⁷.

Importantly, the EU's engagement in the maritime domain is not confined to traditional power projection⁵²⁸. Its approach places a stronger emphasis on non-coercive dimensions of security: defense diplomacy, ocean governance, environmental protection, and capacity building are all integral components. This emphasis shows the EU's recognized expertise in supporting local actors

⁵²⁴Pankaj Vashisht, "Indo-Pacific Strategies: What Do They Entail for India?," *Air University (AU)*, April 24, 2023, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/3371487/indo-pacific-strategies-what-do-they-entail-for-india/>

⁵²⁵European Commission, *op.cit.*, pag. 13

⁵²⁶Giulio Pugliese, *op.cit.*, pag. 82-91

⁵²⁷*ibidem*

⁵²⁸*ibidem*

in developing legal, technical and operational tools for maritime governance⁵²⁹. The planned expansion of initiatives such as CMP and the Critical Maritime Routes Programme (CRIMARIO) to South and Southeast Asia, alongside the deployment of military advisors to EU Delegations in the region, aligns with this broader, cooperative vision⁵³⁰. In contrast to the hard-power orientation of other regional mechanisms, such as the QUAD's Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA), the EU's initiatives favour the transfer of "soft" capacities, empowering coast guards and police forces to counter transnational crime and ensure maritime law enforcement⁵³¹. The strategy also seeks to foster deeper security cooperation through platforms such as the Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia (ESIWA), and through structured bilateral engagement, particularly with regional groupings like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). In this respect, the EU's commitment to inclusive multilateralism stands in stark contrast to the logic of ad hoc minilateralism that underpins many security arrangements in the Indo-Pacific.

Drawing on Kissinger's observation that *a military definition of balance in Asia will eventually shade into conflict if not accompanied by a concept of partnership*, the EU and ASEAN are uniquely positioned to provide alternative, cooperative regional orders⁵³². Indeed, although both organizations face internal limitations, they have established themselves as reliable facilitators of dialogue and consensus-building, unlike exclusionary minilateral frameworks. The EU strategy's very title, Strategy for Cooperation, puts forwards this orientation, privileging multidimensional engagement over polarization. In this sense, the EU's model resonates with ASEAN's own preferences, offering a regional paradigm not defined by hostility toward China, but by principled inclusivity. The EU's ongoing support for ASEAN integration, in line with its 2016 Global Strategy, further corroborates this vision. As the largest contributor to ASEAN's development, the EU manifests how regional, rules-based multilateralism can be both desirable and practically effective⁵³³.

Lastly, the strategy promotes economic engagement as a vector of stability, particularly in strategic sectors marked by interdependence. In this context, Taiwan also becomes a crucial partner⁵³⁴. The EU has explicitly committed to pursuing supply chain resilience in key domains such as semiconductors, working with countries like Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. Ensuring maritime security and freedom of navigation, in accordance with international law and especially UNCLOS, is

⁵²⁹*ibidem*

⁵³⁰Frederick Kliem, *The EU Strategy on Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: A Meaningful Regional Complement?* (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2021), pag. 62-66,

https://www.kas.de/documents/288143/16920728/Panorama+2021_01+Kliem.pdf

⁵³¹*ibidem*

⁵³²*ibidem*

⁵³³*ibidem*

⁵³⁴European Commission, *op.cit.*, pag. 6

thus not only a matter of principle but a strategic imperative for Europe's economic and geopolitical positioning in the Indo-Pacific⁵³⁵.

3.2.5 The EU-China Partnership Against Piracy: A Cooperation Framework in the Gulf of Aden

As previously discussed, both the EU and China share a strategic interest in safeguarding SLOCs, particularly in relation to ensuring the security and continuity of global maritime trade. One of the most tangible examples of this convergence has been their cooperation in countering piracy in the Gulf of Aden (GoA), a region where maritime security collaboration between Brussels and Beijing has yielded concrete results⁵³⁶. In practice, when both actors refer to maritime security within the anti-piracy context, they primarily mean the GoA, the maritime corridor bounded by Yemen, Somalia, and Djibouti⁵³⁷. This waterway forms a critical component of the East–West trade axis, linking the Mediterranean to Asia via the Suez Canal. Consequently, the uninterrupted functioning of these SLOCs is vital to maintaining the stability of international trade routes connecting Africa and Asia to European markets. Given this high degree of strategic importance, the GoA has emerged over the past two decades as a frequent hot spot for pirate attacks targeting commercial vessels. In response to these threats, the EU launched Operation Atalanta in 2008, its first ever naval operation under the CSDP, tasked with deterring, preventing, and repressing piracy and armed robbery at sea in the region. Despite the notable reduction in piracy incidents because of such coordinated international actions, recent years have witnessed a resurgence in hostile maritime activity off the Somali coast, confirming the relative persistence of this security challenge. Since the early stages of Operation Atalanta, the EU and China have engaged in joint efforts under the aegis of the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS). This multilateral framework has facilitated continuous coordination between the two actors, including through shared naval escort operations, training exercises, and strategic planning sessions. Such pragmatic cooperation stresses that, despite differences on other

⁵³⁵*ibidem*

⁵³⁶Holly O'Mahony, "EU-China Security Cooperation: An Intersection of Interests?," *EIAS*, May 3, 2021, <https://eias.org/publications/op-ed/eu-china-security-cooperation-an-intersection-of-interests/>

⁵³⁷Julia Gurol, "EU–China Relations on Maritime Security and Anti-Piracy," in *The EU-China Security Paradox: Cooperation against All Odds?* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022), pag. 99–115, https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/65C745B194DCBDE83933D8047EE530EB/9781529219654c7_p99-115_CBO.pdf/eu-china-relations-on-maritime-security-and-anti-piracy.pdf

geopolitical issues, the EU and China are capable of aligning their interests and resources when it comes to addressing shared threats in the maritime domain⁵³⁸.

As briefly noted above, this cooperation has been established against the backdrop of increasing interdependence in global trade and energy markets, where both actors face heightened exposure to even marginal disruptions in supply chains⁵³⁹. In this regard, the link between recurrent piracy incidents in the GoA, particularly those involving oil tankers, and their impact on international energy markets is especially relevant. The GoA remains essential not only for Western access to energy but also for China's growing demand for oil and gas. Given the fluctuating but consistently high volume of seaborne trade that transits through the region and considering that the vast majority of EU-China goods are transported via this route, securing the GoA has become a mutual imperative. By probing further into all of this, from the EU's perspective the rationale for this cooperation is grounded in the logic of burden-sharing: working alongside other actors reduces the political and financial costs of maintaining maritime security in a high-risk region. Moreover, for the EU this cooperation fits within a broader multilateral approach to maritime governance, consistent with its emphasis on international law and collective security. For China, the strategic calculus is similarly pragmatic. The PLAN lacks extensive operational experience beyond its littoral zones, and cooperation with the EU allows China to project a positive international image while improving its blue-water naval capacity. Domestically, the Chinese leadership also faces internal pressure to address perceived vulnerabilities in maritime security, particularly as popular perceptions of government legitimacy are closely tied to how effectively Beijing safeguards economic and human security. Economically, the stakes could not be higher. The SLOCs passing through the GoA constitute vital arteries for global commerce. Every day, millions of barrels of crude oil flow through this narrow corridor, approximately 2.8 million westbound to Europe and around 2 million eastbound to Asia. Over 20,000 merchant vessels transit the GoA each year. The potential impact of piracy on this trade is enormous. For the EU, the stability of the GoA is critical to securing access to strategic resources and maintaining uninterrupted trade. For China, the picture is even more acute. A substantial share of its seaborne traffic, including economic, military, and energy shipments, passes through these waters. Estimates suggest that approximately 20% of Chinese vessels navigating the GoA since 2008 have encountered piracy-related threats. In light of China's growing investments across Africa and the Middle East, any disruption to these flows would carry severe economic and geopolitical repercussions. Beijing's 2019 Defence White Paper clearly acknowledges these concerns, highlighting the need to protect its "haiyang quanyi" (maritime rights and interests) and "kaigai reiki"

⁵³⁸*ibidem*

⁵³⁹*ibidem*

(overseas interests). In this context, the GoA constitutes one of the most sensitive maritime-terrestrial chokepoints for China's expanding strategic supply chains. Thus, while both actors share an interest in combatting piracy in the region, China appears more reliant on the EU, particularly given the comparative inexperience of the PLAN in long-distance missions⁵⁴⁰. Nonetheless, the benefits are mutual. The EU's engagement increases its capacity to promote a multilateral governance framework and reduce operational costs, while China can improve its global image and develop its naval capabilities in a cooperative context⁵⁴¹.

As consequence, the strategic significance of this maritime corridor has led to sustained institutionalized cooperation between Brussels and Beijing, notably since 2008, when the PLAN launched its first escort mission in the GoA⁵⁴². Since then, the EU and China have intensified joint naval activities. Within this framework, EU and Chinese forces have carried out joint escort missions, strategic coordination, and numerous port visits and training exercises. From 2008 to 2017, China deployed over 100 PLAN vessels and more than 28,000 personnel to escort thousands of Chinese and foreign merchant ships. Over the same period, more than twenty high-level bilateral meetings between EU and Chinese fleet commanders took place and both actors have frequently engaged in joint training exercises. This level of engagement, albeit modest in operational terms, is significant in that it marked the first instance of direct naval cooperation between China and the EU. The growing institutionalization of this collaboration has included exchanges at the highest political levels, such as the 2014 meeting between Xi and former EU Council President Van Rompuy, which explicitly recognized the value of joint action in the Gulf. Institutional cooperation between the EU and China in the field of maritime security has since been extended through the framework of the EU–China Dialogue on Security and Defense. In this context, a significant milestone was reached in 2019 with the organization of the inaugural Experts' Seminar on Maritime Security, convened by the EU Delegation to China in collaboration with the National Institute for South China Sea Studies. That same year, during the Blue Partnership Forum for the Oceans, the two sides committed to intensifying efforts to strengthen global ocean governance and enhance maritime security. Complementing these technical initiatives, discussions on ocean affairs are also regularly held at the ministerial level through the High-Level Dialogue on Ocean Affairs⁵⁴³.

Eventually, the complementarity of interests and the already existent institutionalized collaboration in the field of maritime security could present in the future an opportunity to deepen

⁵⁴⁰Julia Gurol, *op.cit.*

⁵⁴¹Julia Gurol, *op.cit.*

⁵⁴²*ibidem*

⁵⁴³*ibidem*

and expand collaboration beyond anti-piracy, setting a precedent for more robust and regular joint initiatives in other areas of global maritime governance⁵⁴⁴.

3.2.6 Between Beijing and Taipei: The EU's Delicate Balancing Act in the Taiwan Strait

While the preceding discussion put the accent on how shared and pragmatic interests enabled effective cooperation between the EU and China in securing maritime trade routes in the GoA, the question of Taiwan introduces a far more delicate and nuanced dynamic. In this context, the EU has adopted a balancing posture, maintaining elements of cooperation with China while simultaneously engaging Taiwan in less overt but increasingly substantive ways.

Following the PRC accession to the United Nations seat previously held by the Republic of China (ROC) in 1971, the EU and European countries have progressively developed unofficial relationships with Taiwan⁵⁴⁵. From the late 1970s onward, numerous European entities established a presence in Taipei through alternative diplomatic channels: examples include the German Cultural Center, the Spanish Chamber of Commerce, and the French Association for Cultural and Scientific Development in Asia, among other cultural and trade-oriented offices. In reciprocity, Taiwan created similar unofficial outposts in various European capitals, such as the Free China Center in the United Kingdom, the Far East Trade Service in Germany, and the Taipei Information Center in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, the EU and its member states have consistently refrained from formalizing diplomatic relations with Taiwan, adhering firmly to the One China policy in alignment with their official ties to Beijing. The long-standing influence of corporate actors seeking access to the lucrative Chinese market has further maintained governmental caution in managing relations with Taipei. As a result, EU–Taiwan interactions have remained largely confined to the spheres of trade and culture, with only minimal defense cooperation. Notably, recent arms sales to Taiwan from EU member states have been both rare and limited in scope. In 2020, for instance, Taiwan reportedly procured a DAGAIE missile decoy system from the French firm DCI-DESCO and signed an agreement to upgrade its Mirage fighter jets through a renewed maintenance contract. Beyond these transactions, there is no record of European arms exports to Taiwan⁵⁴⁶.

In recent decades, relations between the EU and Taiwan have grown considerably stronger. According to 2024 data, bilateral trade reached a value of 71.9 billion dollars, with EU foreign direct

⁵⁴⁴Holly O'Mahony, *op.cit.*

⁵⁴⁵Philippe Le Corre, "The "Rebirth" of Europe-Taiwan Relations: Explaining Europe's New Balance between Beijing and Taipei", *Asia Society Policy Institute*, January 10, 2024, <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/rebirth-europe-taiwan-relations-explaining-europes-new-balance-between-beijing-and-taipei>

⁵⁴⁶*ibidem*

investment in Taiwan amounting to 58.1 billion⁵⁴⁷. The EU has become Taiwan's fourth-largest trading partner, while the island ranks as the EU's thirteenth⁵⁴⁸. This intensification of ties displays a broader strategy by the EU to strike a balance between economic and security considerations, enhancing cooperation with Taipei as part of efforts to build more stable and resilient supply chains, particularly in high-tech sectors⁵⁴⁹. For its part, Taiwan has actively pursued economic diversification beyond its dependence on China, fostering closer engagement with both the EU and other advanced economies. The New Southbound Policy (NSP), recently revised under President Lai administration, is emblematic of this shift. While the NSP primarily targets neighboring countries, it also underpins efforts to strengthen cooperation with European actors, particularly in strategic domains such as green energy, digital innovation, and high-tech manufacturing, an ambition further catalyzed by the growing diplomatic isolation experienced during the Tsai Ing-wen years⁵⁵⁰.

As known, Taiwan's centrality to global technology markets is underscored by the fact that electronic products account for a third of its exports, a figure that continued to rise during and after the COVID-19 pandemic⁵⁵¹. Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) exemplifies this role: the island produces over 60% of the world's semiconductors and more than 90% of the most advanced variants. This reality has not gone unnoticed in Europe, especially as global competition for semiconductor supremacy intensifies between the United States and China. Disruptions in global supply chains during the pandemic highlighted the strategic relevance of Taiwan's technological ecosystem, prompting European stakeholders to reassess their exposure to foreign dependencies. In this context, the Taiwanese Chips Act, passed in 2023 and offering a 25% tax credit for research-related expenditures, has incentivized foreign investment. Notably, the Dutch firm ASML, a global leader in lithography machinery, plans to open its sixth production facility in Taipei by 2026, committing nearly 950 million dollars to a manufacturing site in New Taipei City's Linkou District⁵⁵². Simultaneously, TSMC is pursuing complementary initiatives in Europe, leveraging the EU Chips Act to expand its footprint⁵⁵³. In August 2024, the company began construction on its first European fabrication plant in Dresden, Germany. With an investment exceeding 10.7 billion dollars, the facility is projected to supply the industrial and automotive sectors and forms part of a broader effort to

⁵⁴⁷"EU Trade Relations with Taiwan", European Commission, https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/taiwan_en

⁵⁴⁸European Commission, *op.cit.*

⁵⁴⁹Simona Grano, "EU-Taiwan Relations: Navigating PRC Pressure, U.S.-China Competition, and Trump's Foreign Policy", *Asia Society Policy Institute*, March 19, 2025, <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/eu-taiwan-relations-navigating-prc-pressure-us-china-competition-and-trumps-foreign-policy>

⁵⁵⁰*ibidem*

⁵⁵¹Philippe Le Corre, *op.cit.*

⁵⁵²*ibidem*

⁵⁵³Simona Grano, *op.cit.*

deepen European semiconductor capabilities. Once operational in 2027, the German fab will manufacture 40,000 silicon wafers per month using advanced process technologies, all vital to high-performance industrial applications. The project also constitutes a strategic alignment with key European firms, including Bosch, Infineon, and NXP, and marks a pivotal step in TSMC's integration into the European market, with additional fabrication plants under consideration across the continent. This geographical diversification is driven not only by market demand but also by greater geopolitical tensions in the Taiwan Strait. Establishing production capacity in Europe allows TSMC to mitigate political risks while capitalizing on the continent's strong industrial base and generous public incentives. Although Europe accounts for only 10% of global semiconductor production, its manufacturing and automotive industries remain key consumers of advanced chips. Nonetheless, despite these deepening economic ties and repeated appeals from Taipei, the EU has so far refrained from concluding a bilateral investment treaty with Taiwan. Brussels remains cautious, seeking to avoid antagonizing Beijing and to preserve their multifaceted relationship⁵⁵⁴.

Although the One China policy continues to serve as the formal basis for diplomatic relations between the EU and the People's Republic of China, there is growing awareness across Europe that a potential military escalation in the Taiwan Strait could carry consequences⁵⁵⁵. An armed conflict over Taiwan would not only endanger economic exchanges with East Asia, but could also severely disrupt global supply chains and produce repercussions for the European economy. As a matter of fact, approximately 40% of the EU's external trade flows through the Taiwan Strait. Furthermore, the presence of an estimated 30,000 European nationals residing in Taiwan underlines the potential humanitarian dimensions of such a crisis for EU member states⁵⁵⁶.

However, within the EU, divergent approaches to Taiwan can be observed along a west–east axis⁵⁵⁷. Western European countries tend to dominate trade, investment, and cultural engagement with Taiwan, including sustained people-to-people contacts. In contrast, Central and Eastern European countries have developed more dynamic and politically visible ties with Taipei. CEE nations have hosted the most senior European parliamentary and governmental delegations to Taiwan, while Taiwanese officials have prioritized high-level visits to these same capitals. A notable example occurred in June 2021, when Lithuania permitted the opening of a Taiwanese representative office using the name “Taiwan” rather than the customary “Taipei”, thereby provoking a sharp diplomatic

⁵⁵⁴Simona Grano, *op.cit.*

⁵⁵⁵Philippe Le Corre, *op.cit.*

⁵⁵⁶*ibidem*

⁵⁵⁷Frédéric Krumbein, “Leaving the Dragon’s Shadow – Normative Power Europe and the Emergence of a Taiwan Policy in the EU?”, *Journal of European Integration* 46, no. 2 (September 25, 2023): pag. 177-178, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2023.2258263>

and economic response from Beijing. In retaliation, the PRC imposed import restrictions on Lithuanian goods and downgraded its diplomatic representation in Vilnius to the level of *chargé d'affaires*⁵⁵⁸.

At the EU institutional level, rising cross-Strait tensions have elicited growing attention. Since early 2021, the European Parliament has adopted multiple resolutions condemning China's hostile rhetoric and actions toward Taiwan and calling for stronger support from the EU⁵⁵⁹. In one landmark resolution, the first ever exclusively focused on Taiwan, the Parliament explicitly recommended that the HR and the European Commission underscore that peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region are of significant interest to the Union and its member states. This resolution also criticized Beijing's provocations, affirmed the EU's solidarity with Taiwan, and emphasized that any changes to the island's status must reflect the democratic will of the Taiwanese people⁵⁶⁰.

Further momentum was generated on 24 October 2024, during a plenary debate in which the Parliament adopted a nonbinding resolution that sharply rejected Chinese attempts to manipulate international narratives surrounding Taiwan⁵⁶¹. In particular, the resolution refuted the notion that UN Resolution 2758 resolved the issue of Taiwan's sovereignty, clarifying that the resolution solely addressed the question of China's representation at the UN and not Taiwan's international status. Although the resolution was symbolic in nature, it served as a direct counterpoint to the PRC's interpretation of international law and expressed concern over Beijing's efforts to unilaterally alter the status quo in the Taiwan Strait⁵⁶².

Nevertheless, it is essential to recognize the institutional limitations of the EP in foreign policy. While it has consistently adopted a more assertive and sympathetic posture toward Taiwan than the Council and the Commission, its role in shaping EU foreign policy remains largely declaratory. As a result, despite its strong rhetorical stance, the EU has been reluctant to adopt measures that might be perceived as confrontational toward China, preferring instead a cautious and measured approach. Hence, the EU's overarching objective remains the preservation of the status quo

⁵⁵⁸Frédéric Krumbein, *op.cit.*

⁵⁵⁹“EU-Taiwan Political Relations and Cooperation”, European Parliament, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0431_EN.html

⁵⁶⁰*ibidem*

⁵⁶¹“Resolution of 24 October 2024 on the Misinterpretation by the People's Republic of China of United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2758 and its Ongoing Military Provocations Around Taiwan”, European Parliament, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/it/press-room/20241017IPR24739/la-cina-prova-a-distorcere-la-storia-e-il-diritto-internazionale-a-taiwan>

⁵⁶²*ibidem*

in the Taiwan Strait and the prevention of any escalation into open conflict⁵⁶³. Given that Brussels is not a direct actor in the cross-Strait dispute and continues to maintain more cordial relations with the People's Republic of China than other major powers such as the United States and Japan, it may be uniquely positioned to pursue outcomes that others cannot⁵⁶⁴. This specific diplomatic positioning allows the EU to avoid a zero-sum choice between Beijing and Taipei. A more explicit articulation of its long-held but often implicit support for the One China principle, coupled with a gradual normalization of Taiwan's de facto status, would be entirely consistent with the EU's doctrine of principled pragmatism. Such an approach would also align with the preferences of a growing majority of Taiwanese citizens, who favour the continuation of the status quo across the Strait⁵⁶⁵.

3.3 A Comparative Analysis: The EU's Varied Security Strategy Towards China in Ukraine and the Indo-Pacific

The analysis carried out in this chapter confirms the central premise of this thesis: that the EU's pursuit of SA enables it to strike a balance between assertiveness and cooperation in its evolving relationship with China. The reason lies in the fact that through increasing SA the EU has started to demonstrate the capacity to adapt its security posture based on both geographic context and the strategic stakes involved. As demonstrated for Ukraine, the Union has adopted a more forceful stance in response to China's alignment with Russia because of the Union's vital security exposure and consequential normative investments in the Eastern neighborhood. Therefore, this assertiveness stems from the fact that Russia's invasion has directly challenged the post-Cold War European security architecture, violating core principles enshrined in the UN Charter to which the EU is deeply attached. The war has so reinforced the Union's need to defend its credibility as a geopolitical actor capable of protecting its near abroad and upholding the rules-based international order. Indeed, the EU's reaction has been defined by firmer diplomatic messaging, efforts to challenge China's narrative strategies and growing economic sanctions. Hence, this posture displays a clear departure from prior restraint and positions the EU as a more autonomous and assertive actor in its immediate neighborhood.

⁵⁶³Francesca Bodini, "The 'Balancing Act' of the Relations between Taiwan and the European Union", *Mondo Internazionale*, May 18, 2023, <https://mondointernazionale.org/focus-allegati/the-balancing-act-of-the-relations-between-taiwan-and-the-european-union>

⁵⁶⁴Jasper Roctus, *The EU and Taiwan: Normalizing the Status Quo*, Egmont Policy Brief No. 319 (Brussels: Egmont Institute, October 2023), pag. 4-5, https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2023/10/Jasper-Roctus_Policy_Brief_319_vFinal.pdf?type=pdf

⁵⁶⁵*ibidem*

Conversely, EU's approach in the Indo-Pacific - where EU's security concerns are more diffuse, long-term and "limited" - has revealed a nuanced playbook. Indeed, while Ukraine lies within the Union's immediate geopolitical vicinity and implicates its core security interests and normative commitments, the Indo-Pacific remains geographically remote and poses no immediate threat to European territorial integrity. As such, the urgency to adopt a forceful stance is considerably reduced. Furthermore, the EU's interests in the region are primarily economic, revolving around the security of SLOCs and the resilience of global supply chains. This interdependence with regional actors, particularly China, has thus incentivized a strategy of engagement over confrontation. Moreover, the EU's limited hard-power projection capabilities in the Indo-Pacific constrain its ability to act autonomously in military terms, reinforcing its reliance on soft power instruments such as diplomacy and partnerships. So, the resulting posture is not only a reflection of lower strategic exposure, but also of structural limitations and a rational adaptation to the Union's comparative advantages in a region where it seeks relevance without escalation. The cooperative approach is best exemplified in the domain of maritime security, where EU-China cooperation in counter-piracy operations off the Gulf of Aden connotes converging strategic priorities and institutionalized patterns of trust-building.

Overall, the coexistence of these two markedly different postures, assertive in Ukraine, more cooperative in the Indo-Pacific, thereby attests to the EU's ability to differentiate its China policy along issue-specific and region-specific lines, rather than adopting an ideologically rigid or one-size-fits-all approach. In this context, the Taiwan dossier emerges as a litmus test for the EU's capacity to exercise principled pragmatism in a highly sensitive geopolitical arena. Unlike in Ukraine, where the EU has directly condemned Chinese actions, or the Gulf of Aden, where cooperation is operational and pragmatic, the EU's policy on Taiwan remains grounded in cautious ambiguity. As seen, the Union has refrained from endorsing formal diplomatic relations or defense partnerships with the island, yet has simultaneously deepened economic, cultural, and technological ties. While some Central and Eastern European countries have pursued a more openly pro-Taiwan agenda, Brussels has still sought to position itself as a more stabilizing actor capable of upholding the status quo while avoiding direct confrontation with Beijing.

In addition, this approach embodies a broader and deepening divergence of security interests between the EU and the United States, which has become increasingly evident in both case studies. In the Ukrainian theatre, Washington's long-term prioritization of countering China in the Indo-Pacific has led the U.S. establishment to contemplate a form of accommodation with Moscow, one that would be anathema to European security logics centered on the containment of Russian revanchism. Conversely, in the Indo-Pacific, the EU has rejected Washington's decoupling rhetoric

and military containment strategies vis-à-vis China, opting instead for a principled but pragmatic engagement built on cooperation, dialogue, and strategic diversification. Consequently, this behavior is not merely tactical, but it signals the embryonic stage of a more independent European strategic culture that no longer takes U.S. threat perceptions as automatically shared but instead filters them through a distinctly European assessment of risk, cost, and opportunity.

As a result, the EU's positioning is perfectly in line with one of a third player in a geopolitical "chicken game", refusing to be caught in the binary antagonism between Washington and Beijing. Rather than choosing sides, the EU strives to preserve its agency, increasing its own payoff by leveraging cooperation with China when interests allow while demonstrating assertiveness when core security imperatives are at stake.

A first and fundamental implication of the EU's differentiated security posture is that China would not be consistently assessed through a threat-centric lens, as is increasingly the case in Washington. Rather than adopting an all-encompassing adversarial narrative, the EU would benefit from preserving a more nuanced and context-dependent appraisal of Chinese behavior, recognizing that cooperation and competition are not mutually exclusive but can coexist within a rational framework of strategic interaction.

Secondly, in geographical areas such as the Indo-Pacific, where strategic interests between the EU and China can converge, cooperative engagement can serve as a stepping stone toward broader forms of collaboration. One such opportunity could lie in the joint promotion of nuclear safety and the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear, chemical, and biological arms. These domains are of particular importance for China, not only due to its geographic proximity to potential proliferation hotspots, but also in light of Beijing's ongoing efforts to frame itself as a "rising but responsible power" and a constructive regional neighbor. From the EU's perspective, such initiatives would equally consolidate its role as a credible global actor, committed to international norms and multilateral stability. In this sense, issue-specific cooperation in regions of overlapping interest may generate positive spillovers, allowing the EU to assert its SA while advancing shared global governance objectives.

With regard to Taiwan, a second Trump administration would likely realign U.S.–China relations in a more unpredictable direction, with potential spillover effects on the transatlantic stance regarding Taiwan⁵⁶⁶. During Trump's first term, the EU adopted a cautious approach toward Taiwan, privileging geopolitical stability and economic interdependence with China over assertive signaling.

⁵⁶⁶Simona Grano, *op.cit.*

Under the Biden administration, while rhetorical convergence with Washington increased, the EU nevertheless preserved again a calibrated posture, supporting Taiwan's interests through non-confrontational channels without openly challenging Beijing. Given the growing strategic divergence between Brussels and Washington, it is plausible that the EU will continue to avoid being drawn into a binary conflict over Taiwan, opting instead for a carefully managed balancing act. In this framework, SA should not preclude the articulation of clear red lines⁵⁶⁷. To Taiwan, the EU should reaffirm that its adherence to the One China policy remains conditional on the cross-Strait status quo, and that any unilateral push for de jure independence cannot be endorsed⁵⁶⁸. To Beijing, by contrast, the Union should communicate unequivocally that any unilateral attempt to alter the status quo, whether by coercion or force, will trigger firm countermeasures, such as steps toward complete decoupling. Furthermore, Brussels should make clear that the symbolic initiatives advanced by certain member states do not necessarily reflect the executive consensus of EU foreign policy⁵⁶⁹. In this delicate context, the optimal strategy for the EU lies not in escalation, but in leveraging its comparative advantage: soft power⁵⁷⁰. In particular, the Jean Monnet Centers of Excellence, many of which are located in both China and Taiwan, could be revitalized as platforms for informal trilateral engagement, facilitating scholarly dialogue on European integration and shared principles. These forums, detached from overtly political content, could offer a discreet but meaningful space for rebuilding trust across the Taiwan Strait. Should direct cross-Strait meetings prove politically unfeasible, alternative venues such as Singapore, where an active EU Centre already operates, could serve as neutral ground. This would mirror similar EU-supported initiatives in North-East Asia, such as those fostered through the Trilateral Cooperation Process between China, Japan, and South Korea. In this light, the EU should seriously explore the establishment of a China–EU–Taiwan Think Tank Forum devoted to EU studies and regional stability. Anchoring such cooperation in academic exchange may allow Brussels to circumvent political resistance while simultaneously reinforcing its role as a stabilizing actor in East Asia⁵⁷¹.

Finally, even in the Ukrainian context, so far marked by diverging security logics between Brussels and Beijing, a future scenario of limited collaboration cannot be definitively ruled out⁵⁷². Since President Trump's early 2025 attempt to broker an end to the war, China has subtly begun

⁵⁶⁷*ibidem*

⁵⁶⁸Jasper Roctus, *op.cit.*, 4-5

⁵⁶⁹*ibidem*

⁵⁷⁰Nicola Casarini, "China-Taiwan Relations and the EU: How European Soft Power Could Help Reduce Cross-Strait Tension", IAI Commentaries, May 2024, pag. 4-5, <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaicom2421.pdf>

⁵⁷¹*ibidem*

⁵⁷²Justyna Szczudlik, "Chinese Peacekeepers in Ukraine Would Be a Win-Win for Beijing", *Lowy Institute*, July 22, 2025, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/chinese-peacekeepers-ukraine-would-be-win-win-beijing>

signaling interest in participating in a potential peacekeeping mission, should a ceasefire or agreement materialize. Although Chinese officials continue to stress that it is premature to discuss such involvement, the topic is already being explored in Chinese strategic circles through international fora, analytical writings, and diplomatic exchanges. During his visit to Berlin and Paris, Chinese Defence Minister Dong explicitly placed peacekeeping on the agenda, a noteworthy development given that it represented the first such visit to Europe by a Chinese defense official in over four years. The trip, kept deliberately low-profile, occurred just prior to the Türkiye-hosted Ukraine–Russia negotiations, further underscoring its timing and potential strategic intent. Meanwhile, Beijing has gradually deepened its engagement with Ukraine in a manner not to provoke Russia. The newly appointed Chinese ambassador to Kyiv, formerly deputy director-general in China’s arms control department, has maintained regular contacts with Ukrainian officials, academia, and business actors, and notably joined a delegation of over 60 foreign diplomats in visiting the aftermath of a Russian missile strike in Kyiv’s Solomyanskyi district. These moves reflect China’s attempt to preserve influence and credibility in Ukraine without undermining its strategic alignment with Moscow. In this balancing act, Beijing has been particularly careful to calibrate its messaging: as Foreign Minister Wang put it, “China does not want Russia to lose the war”, a formulation that, while avoiding overt support for a Russian victory, highlights Beijing’s preference for a protracted stalemate over either side’s total defeat. Indeed, what China appears to seek is a “hybrid peace”, a form of frozen conflict that prevents escalation, avoids regime collapse in Russia, and keeps U.S. strategic focus anchored in Europe rather than pivoting fully to Asia. This vision would thus serve China’s geopolitical interests without requiring overt alignment with either party. A limited peacekeeping role, symbolic in nature, likely involving police officers or military engineers, would support this narrative. More broadly, China’s insistence on a UN mandate for such operations signals its intent to reinforce the UN-centric international order, which it distinguishes from the U.S.-led “rules-based order” it seeks to contest. By operating within the framework of the UN, where it enjoys considerable influence, China could also consolidate its leadership among the Global South, which it increasingly regards as a key bloc of prospective allies. Whatever the outcome of a potential vote at the Security Council, an outcome that will likely hinge on Russian acquiescence, China stands to benefit. If approved, Beijing could project itself as a responsible actor and deflect Western accusations of enabling Russia. If vetoed, it could still present itself as a constructive contributor thwarted by geopolitics. Kyiv, for its part, appears to welcome China’s engagement with cautious pragmatism. President Zelenskyy’s government, according to several analysts, views China as a critical diplomatic “last resort” and is intent on preserving a working relationship, mindful not to antagonize Beijing⁵⁷³. For the EU, this

⁵⁷³Justyna Szczudlik, *op.cit.*

evolving scenario presents both a risk and a strategic opportunity⁵⁷⁴. Rather than dismissing Chinese involvement as opportunistic, Brussels should frame it as a test of China’s credibility as a global power. Expectations must be defined clearly by the EU itself, not outsourced to Washington or shaped by Beijing’s rhetoric. Given China’s prior influence in dissuading Russia from deploying nuclear weapons, and its potential to act as a stabilizing force, a cautiously structured EU strategy of engagement could serve dual purposes: anchoring China to multilateral norms, while also asserting European agency in a theatre where its own security is most acutely at stake⁵⁷⁵. Crucially, such a strategy would also carry strong signaling value toward Washington⁵⁷⁶. As transatlantic divergences deepen, the EU must move beyond rhetorical protest and demonstrate that U.S. disregard for European security interests will incur tangible strategic consequences. Engaging China in a calibrated, non-aligned manner would not imply convergence with Beijing’s worldview but rather display a maturing European strategic culture capable of navigating multipolar dynamics. It would send a clear message: as Washington selectively engages in its adversaries, Europe is prepared to do the same. Appeals to the “special relationship” are no longer sufficient. In an era of strategic competition, only credible action can safeguard European interests and prevent the continent from becoming increasingly subject to a coercive transatlantic asymmetry⁵⁷⁷.

⁵⁷⁴Pavel K. Baev et.al., “Should China Have a Role in Ending the War in Ukraine?”, *Brookings Institution*, March 6, 2025, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/rivals-and-responders-the-us-china-and-global-crisis-management/>

⁵⁷⁵Pavel K. Baev et.al., *op.cit.*

⁵⁷⁶William Matthews, “Europe Must Take the Gamble and Engage with China on Ukraine”, *Chatham House – Expert Comment*, March 6, 2025, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/03/europe-must-take-gamble-and-engage-china-ukraine>

⁵⁷⁷*ibidem*

CONCLUSION

At this point of the thesis, it can finally be argued that the EU's growing pursuit of SA has enabled the emergence of a regionally differentiated security posture towards China, one that is not ideologically uniform but strategically calibrated across different geopolitical theatres. Rather than adopting a binary stance of either confrontation or engagement, the EU is increasingly developing a selective logic of action, based on the specific geographical space, security exposure and material capabilities.

This differentiated posture is clearly reflected in the operationalization of key initiatives analyzed in the second chapter. The Readiness 2030 agenda, for instance, responds directly to China's growing military assertiveness and its expanding footprint in the EU's immediate neighborhood. The increase in Chinese arms exports to Serbia, an EU candidate country, and the broader consolidation of the China–Russia strategic partnership has raised red flags in Brussels, prompting the EU to reinforce its defense preparedness in a region where its security interests are vital, the proximity is high, and its material capabilities more substantial. Conversely, in domains where interests are more diffuse and geopolitical stakes lower, the EU has shown a greater willingness to explore channels of engagement with Beijing. This is the case with the Global Gateway, which, although framed as an alternative offer to China's Belt and Road Initiative, could also be conceived as a flexible platform that does not exclude complementary interactions. The example of the Middle Corridor illustrates how the EU and China can, under specific circumstances, align on infrastructure development goals when interests converge.

Similarly, the EU's economic security strategy, especially its de-risking agenda, exemplifies a differentiated approach rather than an ideologically charged decoupling. While the United States has increasingly moved towards full-spectrum economic containment, the EU has emphasized the selective reduction of strategic dependencies, particularly in critical technologies and raw materials, without severing ties entirely. This more balanced stance thus demonstrates both the structural asymmetries in EU–China economic relations and the political imperative to maintain room for calibrated engagement.

At the diplomatic level, initiatives such as the High-Level Strategic Dialogue reveal the EU's deliberate attempt to preserve as well institutionalized channels of communication with China, even on sensitive security and geopolitical issues. This contrasts with Washington's more confrontational

posture and embodies the Union's broader foreign policy orientation: one that seeks to uphold stability through dialogue and interest-driven diplomacy, rather than zero-sum rivalry.

These dynamics become even more visible in the two regional case studies explored in chapter three. In Ukraine, where the EU is exposed to a direct security threat and China's material and diplomatic support for Russia has clear implications for European stability, the Union has adopted an increasingly assertive stance, strengthening its own deterrent posture, politically condemning China and sanctioning Chinese companies. In the Indo-Pacific, however, where the EU's presence is more symbolic, the geopolitical stakes less immediate and the material capabilities more constrained, it has maintained a more cautious and pragmatic attitude. Cooperation in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and a deliberately ambiguous approach to Taiwan (engaging with Taipei while avoiding overt provocation) illustrate how the EU leverages its autonomy to craft tailored strategies that avoid entrapment in Sino-American dynamics.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that strategic autonomy, while still incomplete, is no longer a purely discursive aspiration. It is already informing how the EU differentiates its posture towards China across regions and sectors, enabling a more interest-driven, pragmatic, and flexible foreign policy. By decoupling its posture from rigid alliance expectations and ideological binaries, the EU is progressively affirming its own agency, choosing when to align, when to distance, and when to cooperate based on region-specific strategic calculations. In this sense, the research confirms that strategic autonomy is not merely about capacity or rhetoric, but about the political space to exercise choice. That space is what allows for differentiation, and differentiation, in turn, is what gives meaning and substance to a truly autonomous EU foreign policy.

The findings of this thesis point to a clear political imperative: if the EU is to consolidate its role as a strategically autonomous actor capable of managing differentiated security relations with China, it must undertake a profound recalibration of its foreign policy architecture. The current framework, inherited from a post-Cold War era of multilateral stability, is no longer adequate to address the demands of a world where power is increasingly fragmented, norms are contested, and alliances are transactional. At the macro level, the EU must urgently confront the structural contradictions at the core of its strategic position. The dual dependency on the United States for hard security and on China for economic interdependence is not sustainable anymore. In a geopolitical climate where major powers prioritize national interest over alliance loyalty or normative commitments, as evidenced by U.S. disengagement from European security theatres and China's aggressive industrial policies, Europe must no longer assume that others will safeguard its interests. It must become the primary architect of its own security.

This shift requires nothing less than a revision of the EU Treaties, particularly in the domain of foreign and security policy. The principle of unanimity in decision-making continues to paralyze the Union in moments of geopolitical urgency, undermining its capacity for swift and coherent action. Moving toward qualified majority voting in foreign policy, at least in specific areas such as sanctions, crisis response, or common positions, would provide the institutional backbone for a more proactive and credible EU external action. Equally vital is the development of a truly integrated European defense industrial base. The Readiness 2030 agenda offer a promising blueprint, but its success depends on coordinated procurement, shared technological innovation, and reinforced European Defense Fund mechanisms. Strategic autonomy cannot be declared; it must be built. To this end, the EU must invest not only in capabilities, but also in political visibility. Figures such as the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy must be endowed with greater authority and recognition, both internally and externally. As it stands, actors like the United States, Russia, and China often bypass EU diplomacy in favor of bilateral channels with individual member states, thereby weakening Europe's collective leverage.

Yet, these reforms face considerable political and strategic risks. From a transatlantic perspective, Washington may view a more autonomous EU as a challenge to NATO cohesion or as a deviation from U.S. grand strategy, especially if European policies diverge on China. While American policymakers often encourage burden-sharing, they remain wary of strategic divergence. If future U.S. administrations interpret EU autonomy as geopolitical hedging or equidistance, they may respond with diplomatic pressure or punitive economic measures, thus constraining Europe's room for maneuver. Another source of risk lies in the EU's ability to balance assertiveness with cooperation in its relationship with China. Should Beijing deepen its strategic alignment with Moscow beyond Ukraine, such as in the African continent or in the Arctic, the EU may find it increasingly difficult to sustain differentiated engagement. The danger is that pragmatic cooperation in peripheral theatres may be delegitimized by China's actions in core areas of European interest, forcing the EU into positions of confrontation that it may not be materially or politically prepared to sustain. At the domestic level, the internal cohesion of the EU represents a further challenge. Persistent divergences among member states regarding threat perception, economic exposure to China, or alignment with U.S. priorities continue to fragment the EU's foreign policy landscape. Moreover, the rise of right-wing populist parties skeptical of further integration poses a structural risk to the SA agenda. A political shift in key member states could not only paralyze institutional reform but also re-nationalize foreign policy decisions, undermining the coherence and credibility of EU action on the world stage.

As with any research conducted in a rapidly evolving geopolitical environment, this study is subject to a series of limitations that must be acknowledged. The most salient constraint lies in the inherent unpredictability of the two crises at the heart of the comparative analysis, namely, the war in Ukraine and the strategic tensions surrounding Taiwan. At the time of writing, both theatres remain in flux, and key developments could significantly alter the assumptions on which this research is based. For instance, China's role in the Ukraine war has thus far remained within the realm of rhetorical alignment and economic facilitation. However, should Russia face a critical setback on the battlefield, Beijing might be tempted to provide more direct military or intelligence support, an act that would fundamentally reshape EU–China security relations and likely accelerate Brussels' strategic decoupling. Conversely, China could position itself as a credible mediator in peace negotiations, in which case the EU might revisit its perception of Beijing's geopolitical intentions. Similarly, the trajectory of the Taiwan Strait crisis hinges heavily on U.S. strategic calculations. A second Trump administration, for example, might deprioritize Taiwan as a national security concern or abandon long-standing deterrence commitments. Such a shift would have profound implications for EU foreign policy: would Europe seek to fill the vacuum, or would it retreat into a more cautious, risk-averse posture? These speculative scenarios underscore the temporal and contingent nature of any analysis that attempts to explain EU behavior in real time. They also point to the necessity of continuing to update and reassess our understanding of regional dynamics as new events unfold.

A second limitation pertains to the narrow scope of autonomy examined in this thesis. While the analysis has focused primarily on the security dimension of SA, the concept is multidimensional by design. Future research could expand the scope to include digital, technological and energy autonomy, areas where the EU's resilience is equally contested, and where interdependence with China poses unique challenges and opportunities. For example, Europe's ability to maintain control over critical technologies such as semiconductors, AI and quantum computing will shape not only its economic future, but also its strategic credibility.

A third limitation lies in the theoretical framework employed. By modeling EU behavior through the lens of game theory, particularly the chicken game logic of trilateral interaction, this thesis has relied on a rationalist assumption of state behavior. While such an approach offers valuable analytical clarity, it inevitably overlooks certain cognitive, emotional, or domestic political variables that often influence foreign policy decisions. Political leaders, institutions, and electorates do not always act rationally; their choices are shaped by ideology, misperception, electoral incentives, and media narratives. These complexities fall outside the scope of this thesis but merit greater attention in future work.

In terms of future research directions, several promising avenues emerge. First, scholars might explore how the EU's differentiated posture toward China is replicated, or challenged, in other regional theatres. Particular attention should be paid to Africa, the Middle East, and the Arctic, where China's footprint is growing and where European interests are increasingly engaged. For instance, the Horn of Africa represents a site of both Chinese strategic expansion and European peacekeeping efforts, offering a fertile ground for empirical analysis. Similarly, the Baltic Sea region has become a locus of heightened NATO–Russia tensions, raising new questions about China's indirect role in regional stability and about Europe's capacity for autonomous deterrence.

Second, future studies could investigate how the EU balances autonomy and cooperation with China in “soft security” domains, such as climate policy, cybersecurity, global health, and digital governance. In these spheres, geopolitical rivalry coexists with interdependence, and the boundaries between competition and collaboration are more porous. Understanding how the EU navigates these ambiguous spaces would enrich the conceptual framework of SA and offer a more comprehensive account of its external action.

Finally, as populist and nationalist forces continue to gain traction within the EU, future research must also consider the internal drivers of strategic (in)coherence. Electoral shifts, institutional bottlenecks, and ideological cleavages among member states are likely to shape the trajectory of European foreign policy just as much as external shocks. A granular, member state-level analysis of preferences, capabilities, and strategic cultures could offer a more nuanced picture of what EU autonomy means in practice, not only as a collective aspiration, but as a contested and evolving political project.

In sum, the path toward a more autonomous and differentiated EU foreign policy is not linear, nor is it risk-free. But if the Union is to be more than a normative power in a realist world, it must summon the political will to reimagine its institutional toolkit, reduce its external dependencies, and act with unity, clarity, and strategic foresight. The price of inaction is not only diminished global influence but also increased vulnerability in an international order that rewards autonomy, punishes ambiguity, and no longer tolerates fence-sitters.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alcaro, Riccardo, and Hylke Dijkstra. “Re-Imagining EU Foreign and Security Policy in a Complex and Contested World.” *The International Spectator* 59, no. 1 (2024): 1–18.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2024.2304028>.

Alcaro, Riccardo, and Pol Bargués. “The Evolution of EU Foreign and Security Policy Discourse.” In *Conflict Management and the Future of EU Foreign and Security Policy*, 8–20. 2025.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003559467-2>.

Allison, Graham, trad. Michele Zurlo. *Destinati alla guerra. Possono l’America e la Cina sfuggire alla trappola di Tucidide?* Roma: Fazi Editore, 2018.

Amighini, Alessia. “Europe Needs to Take Advantage of Its Global Gateway to Face China’s BRI.” ISPI, June 5, 2024. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/europe-needs-to-take-advantage-of-its-global-gateway-to-face-chinas-bri-175614>.

Baev, Pavel K., et al. “Should China Have a Role in Ending the War in Ukraine?” *Brookings Institution*, March 6, 2025. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/rivals-and-responders-the-us-china-and-global-crisis-management/>.

Beaucillon, Charlotte. “Strategic Autonomy: A New Identity for the EU as a Global Actor.” *European Papers*, July 27, 2023. https://www.europeanpapers.eu/europeanforum/strategic-autonomy-new-identity-eu-global-actor#_ftn6.

Belin, Célia, et al. “The Art of the Peace Deal: What the Trump Administration Wants from the Russia-Ukraine Negotiations.” *European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)*, April 3, 2025. <https://ecfr.eu/article/the-art-of-the-peace-deal-what-the-trump-administration-wants-from-the-russia-ukraine-negotiations/>.

Bennett, Peter G. “Modelling Decisions in International Relations: Game Theory and Beyond.” *Mershon International Studies Review* 39, no. 1 (1995): 19–52. <https://doi.org/10.2307/222691>.

Bermann, Sylvie. “European Strategic Autonomy and the US–China Rivalry: Can the EU ‘Prefer Not to Choose’?” Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), August 2, 2021.

<https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/european-strategicautonomy-and-us-china-rivalry-can-eu-prefer-not-choose>.

Bilal, San, and Chloe Teevan. *Global Gateway: Where Now and Where to Next?* Maastricht: European Centre for Development Policy Management, June 2024.

<https://ecdpm.org/application/files/1617/1776/7785/Global-Gateway-Where-now-and-where-to-next-ECDPM-Discussion-Paper-2024.pdf>.

Bindi, Federiga. “European Union Foreign Policy: A Historical Overview.” In *The Foreign Policy of the European Union*, edited by Federiga Bindi, 13-34. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2012. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/theforeignpolicyoftheeuropeanunion_chapter.pdf.

Bodini, Francesca. “The ‘Balancing Act’ of the Relations between Taiwan and the European Union.” *Mondo Internazionale*, May 18, 2023. <https://mondointernazionale.org/focus-allegati/the-balancing-act-of-the-relations-between-taiwan-and-the-european-union>.

Borrell, Josep, and Thierry Breton. “For a United, Resilient and Sovereign Europe.” EEAS, June 8, 2020. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/united-resilient-and-sovereign-europe-thierry-breton_und_en.

Borrell, Josep. “Embracing Europe’s Power.” EEAS, February 10, 2020. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/embracing-europe%E2%80%99s-power_und_en.

Borrell, Josep. “Why European Strategic Autonomy Matters.” EEAS, December 3, 2020. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/why-european-strategic-autonomy-matters_en.

Bosse, Giselle. “The EU’s Response to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Invoking Norms and Values in Times of Fundamental Rupture.” *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 62, no. 5 (December 14, 2023): 1222–1238. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13569>.

Bouffaron, Pierrick, and Benjamin Blandin. *The Future of European Influence in the Indo-Pacific*. Schuman Paper No. 786. Fondation Robert Schuman, April 8, 2025. <https://server.www.robert-schuman.eu/storage/en/doc/questions-d-europe/qe-786-en.pdf>.

Brannegan, David. “The Evolution of European Foreign Policy: Intergovernmental versus Integrationist Visions for Europe.” In *The European Union, Nonproliferation, and Arms Control*, 1–12. Washington, DC: Stimson Center, 2001. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep10988.6>.

Bremmer, Ian. *The Power of Crises: How Three Threats – and Our Response – Will Change the World*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2022.

Brinza, Andreea, et al. *EU–China Relations: De-Risking or De-Coupling – The Future of the EU Strategy towards China*. EPRS Study, Directorate General for External Policies of the Union, European Parliament, March 2024 (PE 754.446).

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2024/754446/EXPO_STU\(2024\)754446_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2024/754446/EXPO_STU(2024)754446_EN.pdf).

Butyrska, Nataliya. “Behind the Table: China’s Role in the Ukraine Peace Push.” *China Observers*, August 21, 2025. <https://chinaobservers.eu/behind-the-table-chinas-role-in-the-ukraine-peace-push/>.

Casarini, Nicola. “A European Strategic ‘Third Way?’ The European Union between the Traditional Transatlantic Alliance and the Pull of the Chinese Market.” *China International Strategy Review* 4, no. 1 (February 9, 2022): 91–107. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42533-022-00095-1>.

Casarini, Nicola. “China-Taiwan Relations and the EU: How European Soft Power Could Help Reduce Cross-Strait Tension.” *IAI Commentaries*, May 2024. <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaicom2421.pdf>.

Casarini, Nicola. “Europe’s De-Risking from China: Dead on Arrival?” IAI, March 24, 2025. <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/c05/europes-de-risking-china-dead-arrival>.

Clinton, Hillary. “America’s Pacific Century.” *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>.

Condemi, Josephine, et al. “Chips Act: Cosa è e Cosa Prevede.” *Agenda Digitale*, June 12, 2025. <https://www.agendadigitale.eu/infrastrutture/chips-act-cosa-e-e-cosa-prevede/>.

Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union. Official Journal of the European Union, 2012. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC_1&format=PDF

Correa, Héctor. “Game Theory as an Instrument for the Analysis of International Relations.” 2001. https://www.ritsumei.ac.jp/ir/isaru/assets/file/journal/14-2_hector.pdf.

Council of the European Union. “European Council Conclusion (EUCO 217/13).” December 20, 2013. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-217-2013-INIT/en/pdf>.

Council of the European Union. “Implementation Plan on Security and Defence.” November 12, 2016. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/22460/eugs-implementation-plan-st14392en16.pdf>.

Council of the European Union. *Council Conclusions: A Globally Connected Europe*. Brussels: Council of the European Union, July 12, 2021. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10629-2021-INIT/en/pdf>.

Council on Foreign Relations. “Timeline: U.S.-China Relations.” <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-china-relations>.

Cvetkovic, Ljudmila. “Planned Serbia-China Military Exercise Sparks EU Backlash.” *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, July 18, 2025. <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-china-military-exercises-eu-alarm-russia/33476628.html>.

Damen, Mario. “EU Strategic Autonomy 2013–2023.” *European Parliament – EU Strategic Autonomy Monitor*, July 2022. [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).

Dell’Era, Alice. “QUAD e AUKUS: Cardini della Postura Strategica Americana nell’Indo-Pacifico.” *Geopolitica.info*, April 8, 2022. <https://www.geopolitica.info/quad-aukus-cardini-postura-strategica-americana-indo-pacifico/>.

Devitt, Michael. *The South China Sea: Assessing U.S. Policy and Options for the Future*. A CNA Occasional Paper. Arlington, VA: Smith Richardson Foundation, 2014. https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA_Files/pdf/iop-2014-u-009109.pdf.

Dış Politika Enstitüsü. “Making Sense of Diverging Security Visions among Global Powers.” June 16, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.org.tr/making-sense-of-diverging-security-visions-among-global-powers/>.

Elysée. “President Macron Gives Speech on New Initiative for Europe.” September 26, 2017. <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2017/09/26/president-macron-gives-speech-on-new-initiative-for-europe>.

Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of Indonesia. “The US Actually the Real Threat to Regional Peace and Security — Reality Check IV: Falsehoods in US Perceptions of China.” June 22, 2022. http://id.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgdt/202206/t20220622_10707647.htm.

Erästö, Tytti, Fei Su, et al. *Navigating Security Dilemmas in Indo-Pacific Waters: Undersea Capabilities and Armament Dynamics*. Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, June 2024. https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2024-07/indo_pacific_240701.pdf.

Erickson, Andrew S., and Joel Wuthnow. “Barriers, Springboards and Benchmarks: China Conceptualizes the Pacific Island Chains.” *The China Quarterly* 225 (March 2016): 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016000011>.

EU Neighbours East. “Charles Michel Calls for the Creation of a Geopolitical European Community.” <https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/latest-news/charles-michel-calls-for-the-creation-of-a-geopolitical-european-community/>.

European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the Commission. *Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the European Investment Bank: The Global Gateway*. Brussels, December 1, 2021. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52021JC0030>.

European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. *Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council on European Economic Security Strategy*. Brussels: European Union, June 20, 2023. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52023JC0020>.

European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. *Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council on European Economic Security Strategy*. Brussels: European Union, June 20, 2023. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52023JC0020>.

European Commission. “Critical Raw Materials Act.” Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs. https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/sectors/raw-materials/areas-specific-interest/critical-raw-materials/critical-raw-materials-act_en.

European Commission. “EU Trade Relations with Taiwan.” https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/taiwan_en.

European Commission. “EU-Africa: Global Gateway Investment Package.” https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/global-gateway/initiatives-sub-saharan-africa/eu-africa-global-gateway-investment-package_en.

European Commission. “European Chips Act.” https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/european-chips-act_en.

European Commission. “European Commission Announces Additional €1.2 Billion Investment Package for Infrastructure and Support to Entrepreneurship in the Western Balkans.” July 2, 2024. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_3586.

European Commission. “Global Gateway.” https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway_en.

European Commission. “Speech by President von Der Leyen at the Online Summit of the Crimea Platform, via Videoconference.” August 23, 2022. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_22_5104.

European Commission. “Speech by President von der Leyen on EU-China Relations to the Mercator Institute for China Studies and the European Policy Centre.” March 30, 2023. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_2063.

European Commission. “Trade Policy Review – An Open, Sustainable and Assertive Trade Policy.” February 18, 2021. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A52021DC0066>.

European Commission. *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf.

European Commission. *White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030*. Brussels: European Commission, March 2024. https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6d5db69-e0ab-4bec-9dc0-3867b4373019_en.

European Council. “EU-China Trade: Facts and Figures.” August 8, 2025. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/eu-china-trade/>.

European Council. “European Peace Facility.” <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/european-peace-facility/>.

European Council. “G7 Leaders’ Statement on Economic Resilience and Economic Security.” May 20, 2023. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/05/20/g7-leaders-statement-on-economic-resilience-and-economic-security/>.

European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). “Impact Assessments and Active Involvement of Civil Society Should Be Guiding Principles for the Global Gateway Strategy.” January 9, 2024. <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/news/impact-assessments-and-active-involvement-civil-society-should-be-guiding-principles-global-gateway-strategy>.

European External Action Service (EEAS). “A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence.” https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-1_en.

European External Action Service (EEAS). “China: High Representative/Vice-President Kaja Kallas Holds EU-China Strategic Dialogue with Foreign Minister Wang Yi.” July 2, 2025. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/china-high-representativevice-president-kaja-kallas-holds-eu-china-strategic-dialogue-foreign_en.

European External Action Service (EEAS). “EU Military Assistance Mission in Support of Ukraine.” https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eumam-ukraine_en?s=410260.

European External Action Service (EEAS). “EU-China Relations Factsheet.” https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-chinarelations-factsheet_en.

European External Action Service (EEAS). “The EU Approach to the Indo-Pacific: Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).” https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-approach-indo-pacific-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-centre-strategic-and_en.

European External Action Service (EEAS). *A Strategic Compass*. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic_compass_en3_web.pdf.

European Parliament. “EU-Taiwan Political Relations and Cooperation.” https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0431_EN.html.

European Parliament. “Resolution of 24 October 2024 on the Misinterpretation by the People’s Republic of China of United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2758 and Its Ongoing Military Provocations Around Taiwan.” <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/it/press-room/20241017IPR24739/la-cina-prova-a-distorcere-la-storia-e-il-diritto-internazionale-a-taiwan>.

European Parliamentary Research Service. *Europe’s Strategic Autonomy: Trends, Challenges and Prospects*. Strasbourg: European Parliament, August 2023. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/751398/EPRS_BRI\(2023\)751398_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/751398/EPRS_BRI(2023)751398_EN.pdf).

European Union. *EU Global Strategy*. June 2016. https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf.

Fravel, M. Taylor, and Charles L. Glaser. “How Much Risk Should the United States Run in the South China Sea?” *International Security* 47, no. 2 (October 2022): 88–134.

https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00443.

Gabuev, Alexander. “A ‘Soft Alliance’? Russia-China Relations After the Ukraine Crisis.” European Council on Foreign Relations, February 2015. https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/ECFR126_-_A_Soft_Alliance_Russia-China_Relations_After_the_Ukraine_Crisis.pdf.

Garamone, Jim. “Austin Signs Internal Directive to Unify Department’s China Efforts.” *U.S. Department of Defense*. <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2651742/austin-signsinternal-directive-to-unify-departments-china-efforts/>.

Genini, Davide. “How the War in Ukraine Has Transformed the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy.” *Yearbook of European Law* (April 11, 2025): 1–44.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/yel/yeaf003>.

Gili, Alessandro, and Francesco d’Ambrosio Lettieri. *Global Gateway: Un Tassello dell’Autonomia Strategica Europea?* Servizio Affari Internazionali, June 2023.

<https://asep2014.parlamento.it/application/xmanager/projects/parlamento/file/repository/affariinternazionali/osservatorio/note/PI0102Not.docx.pdf>.

Girardi, Benedetta, et al. *What the Indo-Pacific Means to Europe: Trade Value, Chokepoints, and Security Risks*. The Hague: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, November 2023.

<https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/What-the-Indo-Pacific-means-to-Europe-Trade-Value-Chokepoints-and-Security-Risks-HCSS-2023.pdf>.

Goin, Vaimiti. “The Indopacific Space, a Geopolitical Concept with Varying Geometry in a Field of Competing Powers.” *Géoconfluences*, October 2021. [https://geoconfluences.ens-](https://geoconfluences.ens-lyon.fr/programmes/dnl/dnl-hg-anglais/indopacific-space-geopolitics/@@openPDF?uid=53b8e208059a4f4cba1563363267c029&id=indopacific-space-geopolitics)

[lyon.fr/programmes/dnl/dnl-hg-anglais/indopacific-space-geopolitics/@@openPDF?uid=53b8e208059a4f4cba1563363267c029&id=indopacific-space-geopolitics](https://geoconfluences.ens-lyon.fr/programmes/dnl/dnl-hg-anglais/indopacific-space-geopolitics/@@openPDF?uid=53b8e208059a4f4cba1563363267c029&id=indopacific-space-geopolitics).

Grano, Simona. “EU-Taiwan Relations: Navigating PRC Pressure, U.S.-China Competition, and Trump’s Foreign Policy.” *Asia Society Policy Institute*, March 19, 2025.

<https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/eu-taiwan-relations-navigating-prc-pressure-us-china-competition-and-trumps-foreign-policy>.

Green Finance & Development Center. “Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).”

<https://greenfdc.org/countries-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative-bri/>.

Grevi, Giovanni. “Strategic Autonomy for European Choices: The Key to Europe’s Shaping Power.” European Policy Centre, July 19, 2019. <https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/Strategic-autonomy-for-European-choices-The-key-to-Europes-shaping-power~2cf5e4>.

Gunter, Michael M. “Chinese Naval Strategy: The Influence of Admiral Mahan’s Theories of Sea Power.” *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues* 24, no. 3 (2020): 54–71. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48590643>.

Gurol, Julia. “EU–China Relations on Maritime Security and Anti-Piracy.” In *The EU-China Security Paradox: Cooperation Against All Odds?* 99–115. Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022. https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/65C745B194DCBDE83933D8047EE530EB/9781529219654c7_p99-115_CBO.pdf/eu-china-relations-on-maritime-security-and-anti-piracy.pdf.

Håkansson, Calle. “Von Der Leyen’s Geopolitical Commission: Vindicated by Events?” Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies, March 2024. https://www.sieps.se/globalassets/publikationer/2024/2024_7epa.pdf.

Harnisch, Sebastian. “Role Theory and the Study of Chinese Foreign Policy.” In *China’s International Roles: Challenging or Supporting International Order?*, New York: Routledge, 2016.

Heldt, Eugénia C. “Europe’s Global Gateway: A New Instrument of Geopolitics.” *Politics and Governance* 11, no. 4 (November 20, 2023): 223–238. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v11i4.7098>.

Helwig, Niklas, and Ville Sinkkonen. “Strategic Autonomy and the EU as a Global Actor: The Evolution, Debate and Theory of a Contested Term.” *European Foreign Affairs Review* 27, Special Issue (April 1, 2022): 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.54648/eerr2022009>.

Herr, Richard. “Evaluating Chinese Soft-Power Effects in the Pacific Islands.” In *Chinese Influence in the Pacific Islands: The Yin and Yang of Soft Power*, Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2019. <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/chinese-influence-pacific-islands>.

Herrero, Alicia. “David and Goliath: The EU’s Global Gateway versus China’s Belt and Road Initiative.” Bruegel, December 11, 2024. <https://www.bruegel.org/newsletter/david-and-goliath-eus-global-gateway-versus-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative>.

Hillebrand Poh, Jens. “Open Strategic Autonomy and the New Geoeconomics: Consequences for EU Trade Policy.” November 2022. <https://iit.adelaide.edu.au/ua/media/2102/iit-pb18-open-strategic-autonomy-final-v2.pdf>.

Hillman, Jonathan E. “How Big Is China’s Belt and Road?” *CSIS*, April 3, 2018.

<https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-big-chinas-belt-and-road>.

Holmes, James R., and Toshi Yoshihara. “Command of the Sea with Chinese Characteristics.” *Orbis* 49, no. 4 (Autumn 2005): 677–694. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2005.07.008>.

Hu, Weinian. “A Survey of the EU-China Dialogue Architecture – Premise, Structure, Functions, and Case Studies.” European University Institute, 2021. https://respect.eui.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2021/09/060921_FINAL_EU-China-dialogues21.pdf.

Huang, Jing. “China’s Role in the EU’s Search for Strategic Autonomy: Nonhegemonic Power Relations during World Order Transition.” *China International Strategy Review* 6, no. 2 (2024): 254–284. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42533-024-00174-5>.

Irrera, Daniela. “Il potenziale dell’autonomia strategica europea.” In *Ambizioni e vincoli dell’autonomia strategica europea. Aspetti politici, operativi e industriali*. Rome, Italy: Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2021.

<https://www.parlamento.it/application/xmanager/projects/parlamento/file/repository/affariinternazionali/osservatorio/focus/PI0206.pdf>.

Jalil, Ghazala Yasmin. “China’s Rise: Offensive or Defensive Realism.” *Strategic Studies* 39, no. 1 (2019): 41–58. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48544287>.

Joret, Gwennaëlle, and Patrick Costello. “Global Gateway and China’s Belt and Road Initiative – Fighting the Last War?” *European Democracy Hub*, January 7, 2025.

<https://europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/global-gateway-and-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-fighting-the-last-war/>.

Kaplan, Robert D. “The South China Sea Is the Future of the Conflict.” *Foreign Policy*, no. 188 (September/October 2011): 76–85. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41353198>.

Kashyap, U. “The Revitalized European Union’s Strategy on the Indo-Pacific: Shaping the Future through Strategic Engagement.” In *Indo-Pacific Strategic Churn*, 131–155. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2025. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-96-5245-7_8.

Kiel Institute. “Ukraine Support Tracker – A Database of Military, Financial and Humanitarian Aid to Ukraine.” <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/>.

Kliem, Frederick. *The EU Strategy on Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: A Meaningful Regional Complement?* Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2021.

https://www.kas.de/documents/288143/16920728/Panorama+2021_01+Kliem.pdf.

Krumbein, Frédéric. “Leaving the Dragon’s Shadow – Normative Power Europe and the Emergence of a Taiwan Policy in the EU?” *Journal of European Integration* 46, no. 2 (2023): 171–190.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2023.2258263>.

Lake, David A., and Robert Powell. “International Relations: A Strategic-Choice Approach.” In *Strategic Choice and International Relations*, edited by David A. Lake and Robert Powell, 3–38. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999.

Layne, Christopher. “This Time It’s Real: The End of Unipolarity and the Pax Americana.” *International Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (March 2012): 203–213.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41409832>.

Le Corre, Philippe. “The ‘Rebirth’ of Europe-Taiwan Relations: Explaining Europe’s New Balance between Beijing and Taipei.” *Asia Society Policy Institute*, January 10, 2024.

<https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/rebirth-europe-taiwan-relations-explaining-europes-new-balance-between-beijing-and-taipei>.

Lehne, Stefan. “Is There Hope for EU Foreign Policy?” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 5, 2017. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2017/12/is-there-hope-for-eu-foreign-policy?lang=en¢er=europe>.

Liboreiro, Jorge. “China’s Peace Plan Blurs Roles of Aggressor and Victim, Says Brussels.” *Euronews*, February 24, 2023. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/02/24/chinas-peace-plan-for-ukraine-is-selective-and-blurs-roles-of-aggressor-and-victim-says-br>.

Lin, Joanne. “2021/164 ‘The EU in the Indo-Pacific: A New Strategy with Implications for ASEAN.’” ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, December 16, 2021. <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-164-the-eu-in-the-indo-pacific-a-new-strategy-with-implications-for-asean-by-joanne-lin/>.

Lippert, Barbara, Nicolai von Ondarza, and Volker Perthes. “European Strategic Autonomy: Actors, Issues, Conflicts of Interests.” SWP Research Paper no. 4. Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, March 2019. <https://doi.org/10.18449/2019RP04>.

Lonardo, Luigi. *EU Common Foreign and Security Policy After Lisbon: Between Law and Geopolitics*. Cham: Springer, 2023.

Mardell, Jacob. “The ‘Community of Common Destiny’ in Xi Jinping’s New Era.” *The Diplomat*, October 25, 2017. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/10/the-community-of-common-destiny-in-xi-jinpings-new-era/>.

Masina, Pietro. *Challenging the Belt and Road Initiative: The American and European Alternatives*. Florence: European University Institute, 2022. <https://cadmus.eui.eu/server/api/core/bitstreams/d4ae1228-f7b2-5580-b4ff-7088ebebef02/content>.

Masters, Jonathan, and Will Merrow. “Here’s How Much Aid the United States Has Sent Ukraine.” *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 15, 2025. <https://www.cfr.org/article/how-much-us-aid-going-ukraine#chapter-title-0-1>.

Matthews, William. “Europe Must Take the Gamble and Engage with China on Ukraine.” *Chatham House – Expert Comment*, March 6, 2025. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/03/europe-must-take-gamble-and-engage-china-ukraine>.

Mazzei, Franco, Raffele Marchetti and Fabio Petito. *Manuale di politica internazionale*. Milano: Egea, 2010.

Mazziotti di Celso, Matteo, and Mattia Sguazzini. “The Road to Strategic Autonomy: Reflections from the Russia Ukraine War.” *De Europa* 7, no. 2 (2024): 109–134. <https://doi.org/10.13135/2611-853X/11424>.

McLaughlin, Madeline. “U.S. Strategy in the South China Sea.” *American Security Project*, October 1, 2020. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep26608>.

Medcalf, Rory. “L’Indo-Pacifique Aux Couleurs de La Chine.” *Politique Étrangère* Automne, no. 3 (August 29, 2019): 49–61. <https://doi.org/10.3917/pe.193.0049>.

Medeiros, Evan. “China’s Strategic Straddle: Beijing’s Diplomatic Response to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine.” *China Leadership Monitor (CLM)*, June 1, 2022. <https://www.prcleader.org/post/china-s-strategic-straddle-beijing-s-diplomatic-response-to-the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine>.

Meijer, Hugo, and Stephen G. Brooks. “Illusions of Autonomy: Why Europe Cannot Provide for Its Security if the United States Pulls Back.” *International Security* 45, no. 4 (Spring 2021): 7–43. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00405.

MERICs. “China-Russia Dashboard: Facts and Figures on a Special Relationship.” September 5, 2025. <https://meric.org/en/china-russia-dashboard-facts-and-figures-special-relationship>.

Miller, Eric A. “More Chinese Military Bases in Africa: A Question of When, Not If.” *Foreign Policy*, August 16, 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/08/16/china-military-bases-africa-navy-pla-geopolitics-strategy/>.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. “Acting on the Global Security Initiative to Safeguard World Peace and Tranquility.” May 6, 2022. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjbxw/202205/t20220506_10682621.html.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference on February 24, 2022.” February 24, 2022. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202202/t20220224_10645282.html.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. “Joint Communiqué.” September 28, 2024. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202409/t20240928_11499659.html.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. “State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press.” March 7, 2022. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202203/t20220308_10649559.html.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. “Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China.” August 2, 2022. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202208/t20220802_10732293.html.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. “Wang Yi: ‘Taiwan Independence,’ Like a Highly Destructive ‘Gray Rhino,’ Must Be Resolutely Stopped.” September 24, 2022. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/wshd_665389/202209/t20220924_10771037.html

Motyl, Alexander. “Trump’s Ukraine Policy Makes Biden Look like a Genius.” *The Hill*, July 3, 2025. <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/5177702-trumps-ukraine-policy-makes-biden-look-like-a-genius/>.

O’Mahony, Holly. “EU-China Security Cooperation: An Intersection of Interests?” *EIAS*, May 3, 2021. <https://eias.org/publications/op-ed/eu-china-security-cooperation-an-intersection-of-interests/>.

Observatory IndoPacific. “European Union.” <https://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/observatory-indo-pacific/eu/>.

Olivié, Iliana, and María Santillán O’Shea. *Development Aid and Geopolitics: The EU’s Global Gateway Initiative*. Madrid: Real Instituto Elcano, July 2023.

<https://media.realinstitutoelcano.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/policy-paper-development-aid-and-geopolitics-the-eus-global-gateway-initiative.pdf>.

Pellegrini, Paolo. “De-Risking vs Decoupling: La Nuova ‘Dottrina’ Cinese di Unione Europea e Stati Uniti: Il Caffè Geopolitico.” *Il Caffè Geopolitico*, May 31, 2023.

<https://ilcaffegeopolitico.net/972156/de-risking-vs-decoupling-la-nuova-dottrina-cinese-di-unione-europea-e-stati-uniti>.

Poling, Gregory B. “The United States Is Deeply Invested in the South China Sea.” *Foreign Policy*, August 14, 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/08/14/the-united-states-is-deeply-invested-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

Posen, Barry R. “European Union Security and Defense Policy: Response to Unipolarity?” *Security Studies* 15, no. 2 (July 2006): 149–186. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410600829356>.

Pugliese, Giulio. “The European Union’s Security Intervention in the Indo-Pacific: Between Multilateralism and Mercantile Interests.” *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 17, no. 1 (2022): 76–98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2022.2118425>.

Rabinovych, Maryna. “The Russia-Ukraine War: A Watershed Moment for EU Foreign Policy?” *EUROPP – European Politics and Policy*, March 23, 2022. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2022/03/23/the-russia-ukraine-war-a-watershed-moment-for-eu-foreign-policy/>.

Raditio, Klaus Heinrich. *Understanding China’s Behaviour in the South China Sea: A Defensive Realist Perspective*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. https://www.viet-studies.net/kinhte/Understanding_Chinas_Behaviour_in_the_SCS.pdf.

Raik, Kristi, et al. “EU Policy towards Ukraine: Entering Geopolitical Competition over European Order.” *The International Spectator* 59, no. 1 (January 2, 2024): 39–58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2023.2296576>.

Roctus, Jasper. *The EU and Taiwan: Normalizing the Status Quo*. Egmont Policy Brief No. 319. Brussels: Egmont Institute, October 2023. https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2023/10/Jasper-Roctus_Policy_Brief_319_vFinal.pdf?type=pdf.

Rossi, Emanuele, and Enrico Maria Fardella. “China’s Strategic Outlook on Ukraine and Global Equilibrium: A Dive into Beijing’s Pro-Russian Neutrality.” *China Observers*, August 22, 2025.

<https://chinaobservers.eu/chinas-strategic-outlook-on-ukraine-and-global-equilibrium-a-dive-into-beijings-pro-russian-neutrality/>.

Rossi, Emanuele. “The Pentagon Report: China’s Military Rise and Its Implications for the West.” *China Observers*, February 19, 2025. <https://chinaobservers.eu/the-pentagon-report-chinas-military-rise-and-its-implications-for-the-west/>.

Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China. “Joint Statement ... on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development.” February 4, 2022. <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Translations/2022-02-04%20China%20Russia%20joint%20statement%20International%20Relations%20Entering%20a%20New%20Era.pdf>.

Rutigliano, Stefania. “Ukraine Conflict’s Impact on European Defence and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO).” *European Papers*, November 21, 2023. https://www.europeanpapers.eu/europeanforum/ukraine-conflicts-impact-european-defence-and-permanent-structured-cooperation-pesco#_ftn14

Sabanadze, Natalie. *China-Russia Alignment: A Threat to Europe’s Security*. Berlin, Germany: MERICS, 2024. https://merics.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/Chatham%20House%20GMF%20MERICS%20Report%20ChinaRussia%20alignment_06-2024-02.pdf.

Sacks, David. “Six Takeaways from the Pentagon’s Report on China’s Military.” *Council on Foreign Relations*, December 20, 2024. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/six-takeaways-pentagons-report-chinas-military>.

Sanny, Josephine, and Jaynisha Patel. “AD492: Beyond Borders? Africans Prefer Self-Reliant Development but Remain Skeptical of Free Trade and Open Borders.” *Afrobarometer*, November 23, 2021. <https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/ad492-beyond-borders-africans-prefer-self-reliant-development-remain-skeptical-free/>.

Shen, Sheng. “Senior Chinese, European Diplomats to Hold Strategic Dialogue.” *Global Times*, June 29, 2025. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202506/1337241.shtml>.

Singh, Anmol Rattan. “Operationalising Game Theory in International Relations: Concepts, Modelling and Interpretation.” *FINS*, September 7, 2022. <https://finsindia.org/operationalising-game-theory-in-international-relations-concepts-modelling-and-nterpretation.html>.

Sodhi, Js. “Island Chain Strategy: Steps to Checkmate China.” *Financial Express*, June 18, 2022. <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/island-chain-strategy-steps-to-checkmate-china/2565232/>.

Stanicek, Branislav, and Simona Tarpova. *China's Strategic Interests in the Western Balkans*. European Parliamentary Research Service, June 2022. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)733558_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI(2022)733558_EN.pdf).

Steinberg, Federico. “Open Strategic Autonomy: Illusion or Reality?” ISPI, June 6, 2024. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/open-strategic-autonomy-illusion-or-reality-175757>.

Synhaievska, Daria. “Why Ukraine Matters: A Security, Political, and Global Perspectives.” *UkraineWorld*, January 17, 2025. <https://ukraineworld.org/en/articles/basics/why-ukraine-matters>.

Szczudlik, Justyna. “Chinese Peacekeepers in Ukraine Would Be a Win-Win for Beijing.” *Lowy Institute*, July 22, 2025. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/chinese-peacekeepers-ukraine-would-be-win-win-beijing>.

Tabelli, Valeria. *The Middle Corridor: Where the EU's Global Gateway Meets the Belt and Road Initiative: What Potential for Complementarity?* Brussels: European Institute for Asian Studies, October 2024. <https://eias.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/The-Middle-Corridor-Where-The-EUs-Global-Gateway-Meets-the-Belt-and-Road-Initiative.pdf>.

Tagliapietra, Simone. “The European Union’s Global Gateway: An Institutional and Economic Overview.” *The World Economy* 47, no. 4 (January 11, 2024): 1326–1335. <https://doi.org/10.1111/twec.13551>.

Tasci, Deniz. “Game Theory: Importance, Applications and Contributions in International Relations.” Hacettepe University, January 27, 2020.

Techau, Jan. “The Five Structural Problems of EU Foreign Policy.” In *Security Politics in Asia and Europe*, 73–86. Berlin: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2009. https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=c5c9140c-20dc-95c5-57d7-146587b20558&groupId=252038.

Teer, Joris, Paul van Hooft, Lotje Boswinkel, and Tim Sweijjs. “The Consequences and Implications for European Security and Policy.” In *China's Military Rise: Implications for European Security*, 1–9. The Hague: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, November 2021. <https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Chinas-Military-Rise-Chapter6.pdf>.

Tema, Malvina. “Basic Assumptions in Game Theory and International Relations.” *International Relations Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 1–4. <https://scispace.com/pdf/basic-assumptions-in-game-theory-and-international-relations-4iexbo5lqa.pdf>.

Tian, Schichen. “The Real Source of Conflict in the South China Sea.” *China-US Focus*, March 6, 2020. <https://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/the-real-source-of-conflict-in-the-south-china-sea>.

Tirziu, Aleksandra. “China’s Military: A Global Power Shift.” *GIS Reports*, March 14, 2025. <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/china-military-expansion/>.

Tocci, Natalie. *European Strategic Autonomy: What It Is, Why We Need It, How to Achieve It*. Rome, Italy: Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), 2021. <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/9788893681780.pdf>.

Transatlantic Task Force. “European Defence Readiness 2030: A New Blueprint for Strategic Autonomy.” *Beyond the Horizon ISSG*, March 25, 2025. <https://behorizon.org/european-defence-readiness-2030-a-new-blueprint-for-strategic-autonomy/>.

Trebesch, Christoph, et al. “Kiel Institute for the World Economy – Ukraine Support Tracker Data.” *Kiel Institute*, August 6, 2025. <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/publications/ukraine-support-tracker-data-20758/>.

Trush, Sergei. “China’s Changing Oil Strategy and Its Foreign Policy Implications.” *Brookings*, September 1, 1999. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/chinas-changing-oil-strategy-and-its-foreign-policy-implications/>.

U.S. Congress. “Taiwan Relations Act.” <https://www.congress.gov/bill/96th-congress/house-bill/2479>.

U.S. Department of Defense. “DOD Official Restates Why Supporting Ukraine Is in U.S. Interest.” September 2025. <https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/article/3671938/dod-official-restates-why-supporting-ukraine-is-in-us-interest/>.

U.S. Department of Defense. “Remarks at the Shangri-La Dialogue by Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III (As Delivered).” June 11, 2022. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/3059852/remarks-at-the-shangri-la-dialogue-by-secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iii-a/>.

U.S. Department of Defense. *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2024: Annual Report to Congress*. Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, December 2024. <https://media.defense.gov/2024/Dec/18/2003615520/-1/-1/0/MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA-2024.PDF>.

U.S. Department of State. "U.S. Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea." Press Statement, July 13, 2020. <https://2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-position-on-maritime-claims-in-the-south-china-sea/index.html>.

U.S. Embassy in Chile. "Kerry at East-West Center on U.S. Vision for Asia-Pacific." August 14, 2014. <https://cl.usembassy.gov/kerry-east-west-center-u-s-vision-asia-pacific/>.

U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA). "China Surpassed the United States as the World's Largest Crude Oil Importer in 2017." December 31, 2018. <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=37821>.

U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission. "China's Position on Russia's Invasion of Ukraine." August 31, 2025. <https://www.uscc.gov/research/chinas-position-russias-invasion-ukraine>.

Urciuolo, Luca. *The Middle Corridor Initiative – Where Europe and Asia Meet*. Briefing Paper. Brussels: European Institute for Asian Studies, March 2024. <https://eias.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Briefing-Paper-The-Middle-Corridor-Initiative-Where-Europe-and-Asia-Meet.docx.pdf>.

Vachudova, Milada Anna, and Nadiia Koval. "Ukraine's Challenge to Europe: The EU as an Ethical and Powerful Geopolitical Actor." *Ethics & International Affairs* 38, no. 3 (2024): 308–332. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0892679424000364>.

Van den Abeele, Eric. *Towards a New Paradigm in Open Strategic Autonomy?* Brussels: European Trade Union Institute, June 2021. https://www.etui.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/Towards%20a%20new%20paradigm%20in%20open%20strategic%20autonomy_2021.pdf.

van Veen, Erwin, Nancy Ezzeddine, Alba Di Pietrantonio Pellise, and Paolo Napolitano. *Band-Aids, Not Bullets: EU Policies and Interventions in the Syrian and Iraqi Civil Wars*. The Hague, Netherlands: Clingendael Institute, 2021.

- Vashisht, Pankaj. “Indo-Pacific Strategies: What Do They Entail for India?” *Air University (AU)*, April 24, 2023. <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/3371487/indo-pacific-strategies-what-do-they-entail-for-india/>.
- Wang, Christoph Nedopil. “China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Investment Report 2023.” *Green Finance & Development Center*; July 17, 2025. <https://greenfdc.org/china-belt-and-road-initiative-bri-investment-report-2023/>.
- Weitz, Richard. “Assessing China’s Ukraine Policy at Year Three.” *China-US Focus*, April 5, 2024. <https://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/assessing-chinas-ukraine-policy-at-year-three>.
- Wen, Yi. *The Making of an Economic Superpower—Unlocking China’s Secret of Rapid Industrialization*. Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis Working Paper 2015-006B. June 15, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.20955/wp.2015.006>.
- Whitman, Richard G. *The European Union’s Common Foreign and Security Policy: Achievements and Prospects*. CSD Perspectives, no. 11. London: University of Westminster Press, 1996.
- Wirtz, James J. “The Maritime Logic of the Melian Dialogue: Deterrence in the Western Pacific.” *Survival* 64, no. 6 (November 3, 2022): 43–56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2022.2143083>.
- Wong, Brian. “European Strategic Autonomy and the Future of Sino-European Relations.” *China-US Focus*, May 30, 2024. <https://www.chinausfocus.com/finance-economy/european-strategic-autonomy-and-the-future-of-sino-europeanrelations>.
- World Bank. “World Bank Group President Says China Offers Lessons in Helping the World Overcome Poverty.” September 17, 2010. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2010/09/17/world-bank-group-president-says-china-offers-lessons-in-helping-the-world-overcome-poverty>.
- Wu, Jiao, and Yunbi Zhang. “Xi Proposes a ‘New Silk Road’ with Central Asia.” *China Daily*, September 8, 2013. https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013xivisitcenterasia/2013-09/08/content_16952228.htm.
- Wu, Zurong. “U.S. Hegemony and Provocations in the South China Sea.” *China-US Focus*, February 26, 2019. <https://www.chinausfocus.com/article/2019/0226/17800.html>.
- Xinhua. “China, EU Hold 13th Round of High-Level Strategic Dialogue.” July 4, 2025. https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202507/04/content_WS6868bf8cc6d0868f4e8f3db8.html.

Xinhua. “Full Text: China’s Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis.” February 24, 2024. <https://english.news.cn/20230224/f6bf935389394eb0988023481ab26af4/c.html>.

Xu, You, and Xiru Zhao. “China’s Discursive Strategic Neutrality Position in the Russo-Ukrainian War: Insights from China’s Strategic Narratives.” *Journal of Contemporary China*, March 20, 2025: 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2025.2479019>.

Yan, Shaohua. “China and European Strategic Autonomy.” In *China and World Politics in Transition*, 181–194. Cham: Springer, 2023. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-27358-2_10.

Yang, Na. “How China Perceives European Strategic Autonomy: Asymmetric Expectations and Pragmatic Engagement.” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 16, no. 4 (Winter 2023): 482–505. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poad014>.