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EU Power (Strategic Autonomy) in a Multipolar World

The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview on the international role of the European Union (EU) and on the debate referring to the concept of strategic autonomy. The discussion on creating/strengthening/restoring European strategic autonomy has gained visibility and significance after the European Union issued its first Global Strategy in 2016, calling for "an appropriate level of ambition and strategic autonomy" to strengthen "Europe's ability to promote peace and security within and beyond its borders". This has been triggered by external pressures, namely the deterioration of the EU's security environment and the fragmentation of the international order against which the EU should have more action potential for promoting its own and hedging others' interests. External pressures included subsequent crises since 2008, the U.K. leaving the Union (Brexit) and the transformation of Transatlantic relations. This concept paper highlights the conceptual elements and key practical aspects of European strategic autonomy not only in the traditional defence-oriented sense but in the wider, global perspective, which we need to study to gain a thorough understanding of the ways and means of creating/strengthening/restoring European strategic autonomy in these fields.

Keywords: European Union, strategy, autonomy, multipolarity, foreign security, defence policy

Acronyms

CARD	Coordinated Annual Review on Defence
CFE	Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
EC	European Communities
EDAP	European Defence Action Plan
EDF	European Defence Fund
EDU	European Defence Union
EEA	European Economic Area
EEAS	European External Action Service
EEC	European Economic Cooperation
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
ESDU	European Security and Defence Union
EU	European Union
EUHR	EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy
GS	Global Strategy
HR	High Representative
IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance
MPCC	Military Planning and Conduct Capability
MS	Member State

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PESCO	Permanent Structured Cooperation
TEU	Treaty on the European Union
TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
UK	United Kingdom
VP	Vice President

Introduction

Since its creation, the European Union (EU) has been described as a sui generis international actor. According to this concept, the European Union is neither a federation nor a confederation, not even a mere intergovernmental organisation, but a separate, sui generis form of integration, which cannot even be considered a state (Bogdandy 2012). To some extent, the EU can be described as a hybrid, state-like, sui generis international actor. Sui generis is a Latin expression, it means that something is unique ("of its own kind"). The EU has its own legal order, which is an integral part of the legal systems of the member states, and in this relationship the EU law has primacy over national law (EUR-Lex s. a.a).

The dynamics of the European integration process have been defined by the duality of intergovernmentalism and supranationalism. In some areas of external actions, e.g. in case of common commercial policy, the EU decision-making processes are supranational, based on the community (or union) method. This supranational method is not applied to the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). In this latter field, intergovernmental cooperation remains the decisive form of decision-making processes. While the community method (or union) is based on ordinary legislative procedure (that is, the adoption of EU legislation is made by the European Parliament and the Council with Qualified Majority Voting), the intergovernmental method is characterised mainly by unanimous decisions of the Council. In the latter case the Commission's right of initiative is shared with the EU Member States, the European Council plays a key role in decision-making processes and the European Parliament has mainly only a consultative role (EUR-Lex s. a.b).

This duality encouraged the development of the European Union as a hybrid political organisation which has the characteristics of a supranational entity. The Common Foreign and Security Policy, which is an integral part of the external actions of the Union, has remained a very sensitive area for Member States.

The political character of the EU

Defining the political character of the EU as an international player has triggered disputes among analysts, experts and politicians since the beginning. At the two distant points of this ongoing political debate are the final goals of the integration process: firstly, the traditional "intergovernmental" union of "European States" (Confederation) and, secondly, the federalist vision of Europe (i.e. "the United States of Europe") (Gazdag 2011). In our days,

Europe is at the crossroads of a more federalist vision and a more sovereignist position. Although this division is rather simplifying, it highlights the duality of the political nature of the EU itself.

The federation would require a real, bottom-up constitutional process, while in a confederation which is based on more intergovernmental co-operation, sovereignty would remain clearly at member state level. It is important to emphasise that the EU long ago surpassed the state model of a confederation, but it did not become a real federation. Thus, the EU is no longer a simple international organisation, but it cannot be considered a State.

In the process of creating an ever closer union, through international treaties establishing the European Communities (EC), and then the European Union, the Member States have limited their own sovereignty, but have not hitherto intended to create a real state based on a new federal constitution. Although, according to the neo-federalist model of European integration, with every step of integration the Union is getting closer to federation, but until a federal constitution is drafted and put in place, a new federal state will not be created. Altiero Spinelli, who was a Euro-federalist politician and thinker, was convinced that a federal Europe must be created through a real constitutional process (Molnár 2022).

In 1985, the European Communities was described by Jacques Delors as a kind of "unidentified political object" (UPO), i.e. a political "UFO", in his speech during the Luxembourg Intergovernmental Conference (Delors 1985). Of course, we can further list the different definitions: according to Wallace (1983), it is "less than a federation, more than a regime", and to Ruggie it is already "the first truly postmodern political form" (Ruggie 1993; Schmidt 2004). In 2016 V. A. Schmidt defined the EU as a "region-state" or a "regional union of nation-states" which is a form of supranational state-like entity. On the basis of the latter definition, the EU cannot be regarded as a supranational state or a true United States of Europe (Schmidt 2016: 17).

According to Robert Cooper, the European Union can be defined as a postmodern system. "The characteristics of this world are: the breaking down of the distinction between domestic and foreign affairs; the mutual interference in (traditional) domestic affairs and mutual surveillance; the rejection of force for resolving disputes and the consequent codification of rules of behaviour. These rules are self-enforced. No one compels states to obey CFE limits. They keep to them because of their individual interest in maintaining the collective system. In the same way the judgements of the European Court of Justice are implemented voluntarily, even when they are disliked, because all EC states have an interest in maintaining the rule of law; the growing irrelevance of borders: this has come about both through the changing role of the state but also through missiles, motor cars and satellites. Changes of borders are both less necessary and less important; security is based on transparency, mutual openness, interdependence and mutual vulnerability" (Cooper 2002; Cooper 2003). According to Cooper's definition, the EU in itself is based on the rule of law. We must take into consideration that Cooper's concept was elaborated just before the big bang enlargement (2004) of the EU, when mainly post-communist countries (e.g. not postmodern) became members of the European Union. In our days we

can observe that these countries are still in political transition, and they were not fully prepared for this postmodern structure.

Due to this dichotomy, a rather complicated situation has arisen: for example, the EU both has and does not have its own "Foreign Ministry". In 2010, the European External Action Service (EEAS) was established, but it is not even an official European institution. The position of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR) is also double-hatted. He or she is the vice-president of the European Commission and presides over the Council of Foreign Affairs. Following the Lisbon Treaty, the intergovernmental and community methods are often interconnected, for example, in case of the EU's migration policy, which also has had external and internal dimensions. The tensions have become clear during the policy debates regarding the management of the migration and refuge crisis. In this case a clear conflict of competences can be observed between the Member States and the EU institutions.

The characteristics of the EU's external relations

Following the unsuccessful initiatives (European Political Community, European Defence Community) of the post-war period, it was obvious that traditional diplomacy and foreign relations would stay in the member states' competences in order to protect one of the most important part of their sovereignty (Gazdag 2005). At the creation of the European Economic Cooperation (EEC) in 1957, there was no hint at common foreign policy in the Treaties. The customs union and the common market, however, resulted in an increasingly significant network of external relations. The European integration began to develop according to the functionalist approach, which focused on economic aspects, and in that context, the first integration organisations (European Coal and Steel Community, European Economic Community and European Atomic Community) had not yet received traditional foreign policy competences.

During the eighties, the European Communities (EC) developed as an economic giant, and parallel to this, intended to have a political role in international relations, as well. Later, the realisation of this was hindered by the lack of real common foreign policy. With the process of the European integration, the need to establish the framework of cooperation in foreign policy became obvious. However, with the creation of the European Economic Community, and the shift of foreign relations towards economic issues, the EC, as a major player in world economy, started to exercise ever greater influence on its external environment.

Since the creation of the European Union by the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, the CFSP has always been characterised by intergovernmentalism. The decision-making processes of Common Foreign and Security Policy and Common Security and Defence Policy are still dominated by the member states, as decisions are taken unanimously. Due to the fact that these are very sensitive policy areas, the realisation of real common policies in these areas belongs to the most difficult fields to be unified in a fully coherent way.

The wars in former Yugoslavia, in Ukraine and in the Southern Mediterranean areas showed that the EU should act more efficiently to become a real global player. Without effective tools and without the reform of decision-making processes, it has only a lower level of influence on international relations. As the EU is a normative or soft power (Nye 2005; Manners 2002), it has laid much emphasis (with more or less success) on the representation and dissemination of its shared values and the protection of universal human rights signing agreements, building foreign relations and executing its development policy.

Following the establishment of the CFSP, this policy started to develop rapidly. Although the successive modifications of the EU Treaties led to the establishment of the CSDP and new positions and bodies (HR, or the EEAS) were created, until recently the EU has not been seen as an effective global player due to the different foreign policy interests and viewpoints of the MSs. It is still hard to speak in one coherent voice and thus play a role of greater influence in international relations. The general rule of unanimity in the field of CSFP makes the EU slower and in some cases ineffective.

Nowadays the external relations network of the EU can be described as the continuous interplay and development of at least eight fields: 1. common commercial policy; 2. development policy; 3. economic, financial and technical cooperation; 4. aid policy; 5. the process of enlargement; 6. association agreements (like the EEA [European Economic Area] or ENP [European Neighbourhood Policy]); 7. diplomatic relations; and 8. the CSFP/CSDP. This system of external relations has been institutionalised through diplomatic, economic and trade relations and agreements between the EU institutions and various international organisations, as well as with non-EU countries.

The legal basis of external relations and policies

The legal basis of external relations and policies are laid down in the EU Treaties (Treaty on the European Union [TEU] and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union [TFEU]):

1. Common commercial policy (Article 207 TFEU, exclusive EU competence)
2. Association Agreements (Article 217, 218 TFEU)
3. Development cooperation (Article 208 TFEU)
4. Economic, financial and technical cooperation (Article 212 TFEU, e.g. IPA)
5. Humanitarian aid (Article 214 TFEU)
6. Enlargement policy (Article 49 TEU)
7. Diplomatic relations: Union relations with international organisations and third countries and Union delegations (Title VI of the TFEU)
8. Common Foreign and Security Policy (Article 37 TEU), Common Security and Defence Policy (Articles 41–46 TEU)

The EU's commercial policy and its external relations are closely linked to EU development policy, to the enlargement process and to CFSP. The decision-making processes and institutional systems of these external policies vary considerably. The common

commercial policy falls within the Union's competencies, while the CFSP continues to operate on an intergovernmental basis. Development assistance and aid provided by the EU to developing countries are inseparable from the practices carried out by each Member State.

One of the most significant features of the Lisbon Treaty (2007) was that it promoted a more transparent separation of competences between different levels of governance. This new contractual framework also achieved results in the separation of the competencies of external policies. By abolishing the pillar system of the Maastricht Treaty, the CFSP is no longer clearly separable from other external actions, yet it remains a special policy which is an exception to all the general rules of functioning of the EU. The strong connection between the two areas is nonetheless ensured by the European Council with its orientation role, the Foreign Affairs Council (i.e. the Council of the Union in charge of foreign affairs and chaired by the HR), the European Commission, the European External Action Service and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. The HR has had an increased political role being also Vice-President of the European Commission and leading the European External Action Service.

Despite the worsening security environment and the different foreign policy interests of member states since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the EU has become a kind of unique, postmodern and also sui generis foreign policy player of the international system. Since the beginning of the 2010s, the EU has faced internal and external threats and challenges (Arab Spring, Ukrainian and Syrian crises, weak statehood, refugee and migration crisis, growing Euroscepticism, Covid pandemic crisis, etc.). The weakness of the EU's responses to these challenges contributed to the acceleration of the integration process in the field of security and defence.

Conceptual diversity, from civilian to normative power

The European Union has been defined as a 'civilian' (Duchêne 1973; Stavridis 2001), or a 'soft' power (Hill 1990). Later, Manners described it as a 'normative' power (Manners 2002; 2006). During the last decades, it has been conceptualised as an ethical (Aggestam 2008) or liberal power (Wagner 2017) in international affairs. However, sometimes the hybrid power character of this foreign policy actor still provokes dispute (Tocci 2008). In many cases, concepts related to the EU cannot be separated sharply, but these are often overlapping. In the literature, it is not uncommon that the "normative, civilian" or even "soft" adjectives are used as synonyms of each other.

In 2010, Andrew Moravcsik claimed that the EU has become a certain superpower which is "able to exert global influence across the full spectrum of power, from "hard" to "soft". Europe is the only region, besides the United States, that projects intercontinental military power. And European countries possess a range of effective civilian instruments for projecting international influence" (Moravcsik 2010: 91). In October 2016 Federica Mogherini, High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, also called the EU a superpower which is able to emerge as a global player relying on its

economic power. She emphasised that: "Because sometimes we don't realise but we are already a super-power as a European Union. Every time I say super-power together with the European Union, I see a lot of sceptical faces but you look at the numbers and we are the first economy in the world, we are the biggest market in the world, we are the biggest provider of foreign investment in the world, we are the biggest humanitarian aid provider and we are the biggest development cooperation provider in the world" (European External Action Service 2016a). In 2015 the HR/VP claimed that the EU is not only a big free trade area, it can be defined as a foreign policy community, a security and defence provider outside and inside the Union (European External Action Service 2015a).

According to Roberto Baldoli and Claudio Radaelli, the power character of the European Union was examined through a "non-violence" lens (Baldoli–Radaelli 2019). The EU's official texts make similar claims about the Union's role in world politics: "A contributor to peace, responsible neighbour, development partner, human rights defender, partner to the United Nations, force for global security, crisis response and humanitarian aid provider, advocate of action on climate change, trading bloc and an expanding union" (European External Action Service 2019). In defining the EU's own role, the liberal-based normative approach, which focuses on multilateral relations, is clear.

One of the basic questions is whether the EU can be regarded as a "power" in the traditional sense of this word. In the absence of its own military power, the European Community was defined by Duchêne as a "civilian group of countries long on economic power and relatively short on armed force" (Duchêne 1973: 19), which concentrates on the proliferation of "social values of equality, justice and tolerance" (Duchêne 1973: 20). The civilian power is "non-military, and includes economic, diplomatic and cultural policy instruments" (Smith 2005: 1).

Since the 1990s, this non-military civilian power (Duchêne 1972; 1973; Stavridis 2001; Juhász 2014: 34) or soft power has started increasingly to become a real normative power, and subsequently this is the most widespread EU-related concept (Nye 1990; Nye 2005; Ashton 2011; Manners 2011). The EU, as a normative power conducting and implementing its foreign policy system (aid policy, neighbourhood and enlargement policy and the EU civilian missions and military operations and via the association, partnership or cooperation agreements), has placed great emphasis on the protection, spread and voluntary acceptance of its principles and shared values by third countries. The normative nature of the EU, thus, the promotion of universal norms and shared values was effective in supporting the democratic transition of the former socialist countries in the period following the disintegration of the bipolar international system. Among the main foreign policy tools of the EU, we can mention enlargement policy, neighbourhood policy, foreign trade, aid and development policy.

The Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy (the Global Strategy or GS), adopted in 2016, also refers to the EU's civilian or soft power character, but it also underlines that this soft power is not enough: the EU must enhance credibility in security and defence. Commitment to stability is a second priority of the EU's GS, which is declared in strengthening the state and social resilience in the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood (European External Action Service 2016b: 44). The GS

represents a more pragmatic approach, focusing on the state and societal resilience of the Neighbourhood. According to Sven Biscop, the Global Strategy signals a return to Realpolitik, and a balance between "dreamy idealism and unprincipled pragmatism". The GS speaks of "principled pragmatism". Compared to the previous security strategy of the EU (2003), the GS takes into account its barriers, and it is less optimistic about the success of democracy transfer (Biscop 2016). The priority placed on the state and societal resilience of the southern neighbours clearly shows the turn away from the EU's pure normative role.

It has become clear that the normative and soft power offered by the EU is insufficient compared to the goals set by Article 21 of the Treaty on the European Union for its external action and CFSP. The EU had only a limited impact on the transition processes of the countries in the closest region (e.g. the strengthening of civil society). It is obvious that in the future, the EU must use both soft and hard foreign policy instruments in the framework of the comprehensive approach elaborated in 2013 and the integrated approach introduced by the Global Strategy. In 2016 Jean-Claude Juncker noted in his State of the Union speech: "Soft power is no longer enough […] in the EU's increasingly dangerous neighbourhood." It is not coincidental that following the review of the ENP supporting stabilisation became a top priority (Joint Communication 2015).

The EU has a long history of ambitions but in reality it provided unsuccessful and insufficient plans for its Neighbourhood. It is not surprising that the Global Strategy adopted in 2016, which tried to find a perfect balance between idealism and sometimes inconvenient reality, has introduced the approach of "principled pragmatism" (European External Action Service 2016).

Enlargement policy can still be considered the most effective normative "foreign policy" instrument of the European Union. Through the perspective of EU membership, the EU has the greatest possible Europeanisation effect on countries outside its territory, that is, on the domestic politics of the countries willing to join the EU. This process is triggered by a kind of positive constraint. The European perspective clearly offered to each country (the possibility of accession) results in real institutional, political and economic changes. The countries which wish to become a member state are under the process of Europeanisation. The process of joining the EU covers all major civilian tools from trade policy to development policy (Manners 2015).

However, this instrument is limited by geographical reasons, and it does not have the same effect in the Southern Neighbourhood. Having a magnetic normative power for the pre-accession countries, the European Union and its member states served as a model of modernisation during the Eastern enlargement and as a stabilising force in the Western Balkans. In the area of neighbourhood policy, where the influence of other international actors is dominant, the EU has been able to show fewer real results. We can also mention the case of Ukraine, which is intersected by spheres of influence of the EU and Russia. In this case, needed political and economic reforms can be required if the unprovoked Russian aggression is over and the EU offers a realistic European perspective. It is not a coincidence that Ukraine was granted the EU candidate status by the European Council in June 2022.

The future of European hard power

During the last few years, the acceleration of Europe's security and defence cooperation has been caused by at least five processes and factors. Firstly, the aggression of Russia in Ukraine, secondly, the mass illegal/irregular migration and refugee crisis, and thirdly, the deteriorating EU−USA relations during the presidency of Donald Trump can be mentioned. The result of the referendum on Brexit, and then the British exit from the European Union is the fourth reason behind this process. Finally, the changing global environment should not be forgotten, in which the existing global order is threatened by the rise of new powers, which can lead to a new arms race (Molnár 2022).

In December 2013, the European Council held its first thematic meeting dedicated to defence, identifying priority actions for stronger cooperation (European Council 19–20 December 2013, Conclusions). In 2014, the candidate for President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, highlighted the need to introduce enhanced cooperation in the defence sector, particularly in the area of procurement (European Commission 2021). The idea that attracted most public attention was Juncker's announcement in March 2015. The President of the European Commission called for a common European army to face external threats (Welt 2015; Juncker 2016a). Juncker's announcement provoked an intensive debate among experts and politicians of MSs. While some were sceptical about the idea, others considered it food for thought for further debate (European Parliament 2015: 5).

In 2015, the report on 'More Union in European Defence' coordinated by Javier Solana[1] and Jaap de Hoop Scheffer[2] recommended the creation of a European Defence Union (EDU) as the ultimate goal of integration in the field of defence. The report outlined that due to the absence of a core group of member states, there are different regional or geopolitical clusters of cooperation. According to the report, this model of cooperation is based on the principle of variable geometry, namely on the different interests and political will of the Member States. The authors of the report also proposed the use of the Lisbon Treaty's potential, such as Article 44 TEU and Article 46 (PESCO) (Blockmans–Faleg 2015: 7–8).

The terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015 also served as an incentive for further deepening, as, following the events, France asked for the activation of the EU treaty's mutual defence/assistance clause (Article 42.7 TEU) in order to be provided assistance in its "war" against the so-called Islamic State (ISIS). On 21 January 2016, the European Parliament welcomed the decision of all Member States to help France. The EP adopted, of course, a non-binding resolution on the need to go further and to create a European Defence Union. According to the document, the process could lead to the creation of a European army in the long term (European Parliament 2016a). The resolution was non-binding as the European Parliament has only very limited competences in the field of CFSP and CSDP.

[1] Former High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and NATO Secretary General.
[2] Former NATO Secretary General.

In 2016, the result of the referendum on Brexit significantly accelerated the integration process in this area. The Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, adopted in June 2016, just a few days after the British referendum, expressed the goal of strategic autonomy and strengthening the EU as a security community (European External Action Service 2016b). After years of immobility in the field of defence integration, Federica Mogherini, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (EU HR/VP) successfully presented the Global Strategy to the European Council and the implementation of the strategy started.

In 2016, Germany, France, Italy and Spain were the most committed supporters of closer integration in the field of defence among the EU Member States (Bundesregierung.de 2017; Partito Democratico 2018; Grevi 2016). The United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union has created a new situation. On the one hand, British politics did not hinder further deepening of integration in this area. On the other hand, it meant further reduction of European defence expenditure, as the U.K.'s defence budget accounted for 20% of all Member States' defence budget. Following the Brexit referendum, France and Germany have increasingly taken the lead in the reform process of the integration. In an open letter on 27 June 2016, four days after the referendum, the French and German Foreign Ministers emphasised the need to establish a European Defence Union (Koenig–Walter-Franke 2017; Ayrault–Steinmeier s. a.). In September 2016, German and French Defence Ministers presented their plan for implementing the Global Strategy. They proposed to build an EU headquarters, strengthen Eurocorps, rethink the Athena system, establish security and defence partnerships with African countries, develop a European research agenda, strengthen relations with NATO, revitalise the battlegroup concept and realise the potential of the Lisbon Treaty, in particular the implementation of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) (Koenig–Walter-Franke 2017; Molnár 2018; Molnár 2022).

In September 2016, at the Foreign Affairs Council in Bratislava, Federica Mogherini presented the main steps of implementing the Global Strategy (e.g. the European Defence Action Plan (EDAP), NATO–EU cooperation and the European Defence Fund (EDF) (Informal Meeting of Foreign Affairs Ministers 2016). In September 2016, concerning the plans, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, in his annual speech on the State of the European Union emphasised, inter alia, the need for closer integration in the defence area, such as the establishment of a single headquarters for EU missions, the realisation of the EDF and the PESCO (Juncker 2016b). Although the EP lacks real decision-making roles in the field of CSDP, this institution also supported these propositions. According to the resolution of the European Parliament in 2016, the EDU should provide guarantees and capabilities to EU Member States beyond their individual ones and it proposed the establishment of a Council format for defence ministers (European Parliament 2016b).

In 2017, the European Commission published the "Reflection Paper on the Future of European Defence", highlighting that "the foundations of a European security and defence union (ESDU) are gradually being built" and the ESDU "should encourage a stronger alignment of strategic cultures, as well as a common understanding of threats

and appropriate responses. It will require joint decision-making and action, as well as greater financial solidarity at European level" (European Commission 2017: 11). In September 2017, Jean-Claude Juncker, in his annual speech on the State of the European Union expressed that by 2025 the EU needs to become a fully-fledged European Defence Union (EDU) (Juncker 2017).

Although the definition of the ESDU or EDU is still not clear, the gradual realisation of deeper European defence cooperation began after the adoption of the Global Strategy. Since 2016, this long process has been built on at least five pillars: the establishment of the Permanent Structured Cooperation, the introduction of the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), the establishment of the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC), the creation of the European Defence Fund and the establishment of the European Peace Facility. It is worth mentioning that the MPCC created a permanent command structure for EU (non-executive) military operations, and with the creation of the EDF, it became possible to fund research and the joint development defence projects from the EU budget, in both cases for the first time. These achievements were unimaginable just a decade ago (European Commission 2016).

Although the 2018 State of the Union address did not mention the idea of the European Defence Union, it highlighted that due to the geopolitical situation, the moment of European sovereignty had come. Juncker stated that it was time for Europe to take its destiny into its own hands and to play a role, as a Union, in shaping global affairs as a more sovereign actor in international relations. According to his vision, European sovereignty is born of Member States' national sovereignty and does not replace it. Sharing sovereignty makes them stronger. He also emphasised that this process does not mean the militarisation of the European Union; it means becoming more autonomous and living up to the EU's global responsibilities (Juncker 2018).

An important predecessor of the EU's concept of strategic autonomy can be found in the 1994 French White Paper (Livre Blanc sur la Défense 1994) and in the 1998 Franco–British Joint Declaration in Saint-Malo (CVCE 2015). The 2016 Global Strategy clearly articulated the need for the strategic autonomy of the EU (European External Action Service 2016b). Not only the deteriorating international security environment and Brexit, but also the fact that U.S. attention turned to the Asia-Pacific region over the past decade intensified the debate regarding strategic autonomy (Biscop 2016; Béraud-Sudreau–Pannier 2021; Krotz–Schild 2018; Molnár 2022).

To this day, a formal definition of the concept of strategic autonomy has not yet been developed at EU level. The concept can be summarised as the EU's ability to ensure its security and to act autonomously on land, in air, at sea, in space and in cyberspace, to project power, to respond to external crises, and finally, to decide independently in the field of defence policy (Biscop 2019; Varga 2017; Sutter 2020). Member States have different interests and views on the concept (Weitershausen et al. 2020; Grüll–Lawton 2020; Recchia 2020; Silva–Zachary 2020). So far, the EU launched several initiatives to strengthen European defence capabilities and autonomy (PESCO, CARD, EFD, MPCC), however, in terms of size and ambitions, none of these developments fully met the initial high expectations (Molnár 2022).

In 2019, the new President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, proposed to lead a 'geopolitical Commission' and Josep Borrell, the new High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP), expressed that the EU needs to "learn the language of power". Although the historical connotations of geopolitics are controversial, the new Commission embraced the concept. According to Fiott, it would not be easy for the EU to survive in the world of Mackinder or Mahan where "the ideas such as the military control of the 'heartland' or mastery of the seas are decisive" (Fiott 2020).

Although the 2020 State of the Union Address of Ursula von der Leyen did not mention the establishment of EDU or strategic autonomy (Leyen 2020), the process continued. The Member States' governments and institutions elaborated the first threat analysis in a 2-year process, which led to the adoption of the Strategic Compass in 2022. According to Fiott, the Strategic Compass hopefully "gives concrete politico-strategic guidance for the existing level of ambition so that it can deliver on operational deployability and capability development" (Fiott 2020: 7). In February 2021, the President of the European Commission at the video conference of the European Council emphasised the necessity of creating the EDU on building blocks such as the PESCO, supported by the financial resources of the EDF (European Commission 2021; Molnár 2022). In 2021, the State of the Union Address referred to the need for the European Defence Union and it stated that, although the EU has started to develop a European defence ecosystem, there is still room to proceed (Leyen 2021). The Russian aggression in Ukraine created more deteriorating security situation in Europe. In 2022, the EU adopted its first ever military doctrine, the Strategic Compass.

Why does the European Union need (more) strategic autonomy?

The discussion on creating/strengthening/restoring European strategic autonomy has gained visibility and significance after the European Union (EU) issued its first Global Strategy in 2016, calling for "an appropriate level of ambition and strategic autonomy" to strengthen "Europe's ability to promote peace and security within and beyond its borders" (European External Action Service 2016b: 9). This has been triggered not primarily by the organic internal institutional development of the union (further deepening of the integration), but by external pressures, namely the deterioration of the EU's security environment and the fragmentation of the international order against which the union should have more action potential for promoting its own and hedging others' interests. However, as a consequence of adopting such an ambitious agenda that characterises a capable great power, we could see important steps towards both streamlining and deepening cooperation in policy fields that should underpin European strategic autonomy, such as economic policy, technology and innovation, civilian crisis management, defence capability development, sanctions policy, etc.

External pressures have unfolded during the past decade with growing impetus. On the one hand, the global shift in power brought about the relative weakening of the West,

including both European countries and the United States versus returning (Russia) and emerging great powers (China, India) and regional powers (Iran). This does not mean the inferiority of Western countries to emerging powers, but a new rivalry across the power spectrum and all policy fields. However, it is important to properly evaluate the effects of this change as the weakening hegemonic role of the United States and the formation of a new multipolar world order (Murray–Brown 2013), which not only create strains but also offer opportunities. For Europe, this shift causes the transformation of bilateral relations across the Atlantic, as well as more room for manoeuver within multilateral relations to other great powers. In other words, the widening of the international arena takes place where the EU should be a capable actor (Dee 2015). On the other hand, the fragmentation of the international order brings about the demise of the liberal world order set up after World War II, the emptying of norms, legal frameworks and those international institutions that were devised to prevent and moderate international conflicts. Great powers challenging Western (U.S.) hegemony not only criticise the rules, structures and institutions of the liberal world order but effectively undermine it through their actions, sometimes also offering alternative conduct and formats. Therefore, it is imperative that the European Union be ready and capable of influencing international relations along European interest through developing its own capabilities of strategic autonomy and counterbalance such challenges.

During the last decades, significant changes have taken place in the international system: great power competitions and politics, characteristics of the former bipolar international system, have intensified again. The nearly two decades of U.S. hegemony began to be eroded by an economically and militarily growing China and a much more ambitious Russia than before. The weakening of the liberal international world order has brought about the upset of the hitherto established but already fragile balance. As a result, the liberal international system based on cooperation and interdependence in the Western-inspired multilateral framework seems to be tearing apart (Haass 2017; Ikenberry 2018; Kundnani 2017; Fukuyama 2020; Helwig–Siddi 2020).

Further incentives were added to the debate on European strategic autonomy by the series of crises European countries have witnessed since 2008 on the continent and in its immediate neighbourhood: the Russo–Georgian War (2008), the financial and economic crisis (2008–2009) and its consequences, the Arab Spring (2010) and its aftermath, such as the Libyan (2011–) and Syrian (2011–) civil wars, the emergence of Daesh – 'Islamic State' (2014) and a subsequent wave of terrorism (2015), the illegal annexation of Crimea (2014) and Russian-induced armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine (2014–), the migration and refugee crisis (2015), the outbreak of the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic (2019 –), and the 2nd Nagorno-Karabah war (2020). A common element of most external crises was that the European Union had only limited or no role in managing these – for various reasons, but mostly due to the lack of political consensus of the member states upon what action should be taken. In these cases, either the EU stood by, vulnerable to their effects, or European member states managed to influence events by participating in ad hoc formats, such as the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS or the 'Normandy Format' (Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine to resolve the war in Donbass). Reaching the necessary consensus

was not easy in case of internal crises either, but in this regard the union proved to be a somewhat more capable actor.

The relation of the EU towards two key allies has also altered since the Global Strategy had been adopted, strengthening the calls for stronger EU strategic autonomy. After the election of Donald Trump as U.S. President in 2017, an unprecedented transformation of Transatlantic relations took place, questioning the security guarantees Washington had been providing for Europe for decades. Even though some realignment in style is expected to take place under the Biden Administration, the strategic processes of U.S. pivot towards the Indo-Pacific and the resulting shift of forces and commitment away from Europe and the European neighbourhood will not change for the better. By 2021, the Brexit process that started in 2016 had also been concluded, depriving the EU from one of its most capable member states in terms of political, diplomatic, economic and military power, as well as in the field of technology and innovation.

Among these circumstances and upon adopting ambitious strategic goals, the 2020s will set the stage for the EU to create the indispensable political, institutional and material pillars of its autonomous ability to act in its own way, as termed by High Representative Josep Borrell: to realise Europe's *Sinatra Doctrine* (Borrell 2020).

Defining and conceptualising European strategic autonomy

The concept of 'strategic autonomy' in the European context has evolved throughout the past six years, revealing a complex nature upon identifying its various aspects under several names, such as 'strategic responsibility' (Brattberg–Valásek 2019), 'strategic sovereignty' (Leonard–Shapiro 2019) and 'open strategic autonomy' (Hogan 2020). While there is no generally agreed common definition, shared elements can be identified in the relevant literature, moving from a narrow defence-oriented conception (Fiott 2018) towards global understanding both in terms of meaning and geographical focus (Lippert et al. 2019).

For a suitable working definition, strategic autonomy in a general approach means the ability of an actor to independently determine its goals and priorities of international action, undertake decisions and realise them, including all their institutional, political and material aspects. In the broadest sense, strategic autonomy entails the capability to (trans)form, change and enforce the rules of the international order – as opposed to an obligatory (forced) consent to following the rules determined by other actors. As such, the opposite of strategic autonomy in the current international order would be the adoption of the rules defined by the United States, Russia and China or others.

In one of the most recent analyses, Niklas Helwig offered a conceptual overview, summarising the broad understanding of strategic autonomy as the following (Helwig 2020: 6):

Table 1: The broad understanding of strategic autonomy

	Conventional perspective	Global perspective
Strategic autonomy for…	Security and defence	Security and defence, trade and industry, digitalisation, climate, health
Strategic autonomy from…	United States	United States, China, other emerging powers and economies
Strategic autonomy to…	Act militarily in Europe's neighbourhood, protect Europe	Promote European interests and values
Drivers	U.S. structural pivot, transatlantic uncertainties	Rise of China and rivalry with U.S., technological change
Inter-organisational relations	NATO	NATO, UN, WTO
Alternative concepts	Strategic responsibility, ability to act	Open strategic autonomy (trade), European sovereignty (tech, industry)
Principal dividing lines	Differing threat perceptions among EU member states and ties to the U.S.	Political economy / Free market vs. state intervention

Source: Helwig 2020: 6

We can clearly see that the global understanding of strategic autonomy goes beyond security and defence issues, primary ties to the U.S. and NATO, and encompasses those means of power in which the EU can indeed play a global role: economy and trade (the common market), technology, as well as multilateralism in global institutions. In the practical sense, other policy areas in which member states and EU institutions should join their efforts to act strategically include energy policy, intelligence, development and aid, civilian and military crisis management, sanctions policy, arms control, immigration and refugee policy, grey-zone conflicts and defence. This approach refers to strategic autonomy as "an essential enabler of Europe's shaping power" (Grevi 2019).

Helwig also suggests three dimensions within which the capacity of the EU regarding its strategic autonomy should be evaluated: institutional, material and political aspects (Helwig 2020: 8):

Institutional autonomy – Distinct structures and instruments for the planning and implementation of policies

Elements:

- Decision-making structures: The EU and its member states have structures in place that facilitate the shaping and taking of joint decisions.
- Planning capacities: The EU has capacities to facilitate the preparation of joint decisions and support member states in their implementation.
- Power transfer: The EU can enforce the implementation of decisions, for example through a transfer of competences or a sanctioning mechanism in case of member states' non-compliance.

Material autonomy – The technological, industrial and military capacity to independently implement decisions

Elements:

- Pooling and sharing: Member states share or jointly use critical goods and capabilities (e.g. military) in the implementation of policies.
- Capabilities and supply security: The EU and member states ensure the availability of capabilities (e.g. military) and critical supplies needed to implement policies through joint procurement, diversification, or stockpiling.
- Domestic industries: The EU and member states develop industries in strategic sectors through R&D efforts, financial incentives, or regulatory measures.

Political autonomy – The ability to independently define common priorities and take decisions

Elements:

- Joint assessment: Member states seek a common understanding of the challenges and options regarding a threat or international development.
- Policy convergence: Member states actively engage in a process of formulating a joint response (consultations, bargaining and leadership).
- Strategic culture: Member states can base their response on a common set of norms, strategic evaluations and behavioural patterns that facilitate joint action.

These three dimensions constitute the building blocks of EU institutions' and member states' ability to act, around which political and expert debates also revolve. In the institutional dimension one must understand to what extent the EU's structures and processes, including their general and joint authorities, are fit for supporting collective action based on sovereignty sharing and sui generis EU competences. In the material domain, the question is to what extent do member states provide the necessary resources, goods and capabilities for the EU to execute the jointly agreed decisions and realise their shared goals. While in the political domain the key question is to what extent can member states form consensual decisions to enable the EU to take action at all, which has very often been the most fundamental obstacle to take any action on behalf of the EU throughout the external crises of the past decade.

We can summarise very briefly that the European Union can reach more robust strategic autonomy in the next decade on a global scale only if its member states increase their efforts to cooperate, consent to effective sovereignty sharing, and underpin their joint endeavour with resources. Apart from some key EU institutions, such as the Commission that is to function with a 'geopolitical' mindset, or the External Action Service, which is, by definition, the driver behind many foreign policy initiatives, the EU apparatus itself and member state representatives as well as national governments and strategic communities should also adopt a strategic culture that drives common thinking and action towards the above-mentioned directions. The elaboration of the Strategic Compass kick-started by the German Presidency in 2020 to be concluded during the French Presidency in 2022, might serve as a key tool in this process.

Conclusions

The European Union cannot be defined as a military power in the absence of its own European army. Although Jean-Claude Juncker called for the creation of a European army, the EU remains primarily a civilian, soft or normative power relying on its own economic strength and democratic values. This is underlined by the fact that one of the most important instruments of EU external actions is the common commercial policy. This policy plays a primary role in preserving the EU's global economic weight in a growing international economic competition. The development and aid policy plays also an important role in shaping the EU's external relations, as well as being a contradiction of the sanction policy. Although the EU can rely on military tools (CSDP missions and operations) in a crisis management situation, the contradictions and shortcomings that still exist will continue to hinder a truly successful joint action.

If the Member States are able to implement the ambitious plans for the defence union consistently and if the EU is able to use its various (economic, political, diplomatic, military, etc.) assets in external actions, the EU can become a real "smart power". Without a real political will, the current momentum can be lost, ambitious plans will remain on paper or reforms can only bring partial results.

It is clear that following the aggression of Russia in Ukraine, the referendum on Brexit and, partly, due to the controversial policy of Donald Trump towards the EU, the process for deepening integration in defence and security has been accelerated.

Nowadays, European societies expect EU institutions to provide effective responses to the management of emerging crises inside and outside the EU. The migration and refugee crisis, terrorism and armed conflicts in the immediate neighbourhood have exposed shortcomings in Europe's foreign policy system. The weaknesses of the intergovernmental mechanisms, the conflict of interests between Member States and the lack of defence union all contributed to the weakness of the EU's responses. Although we have noticed that cooperation between the EU institutions and major players has been steadily improved over the last few years, societies are becoming more and more impatient, there is growing frustration and dissatisfaction with the EU in the various forms of Euroscepticism.

However, in order to deal with these high expectations, the European integration should be deepened. Spinelli pointed out that, although national governments were generally conservative, in the face of a crisis or a challenge, that is, in periods of "creative tensions", they were able to renew and reform the European institutional structures, overcome their own limitations (Spinelli 1972).

Following the financial-economic and migratory-refugee crisis the EU is at a crossroads: to further deepen or at least to maintain the level of integration ("Make it or break it?") (Bruni et al. 2017). Several questions have been raised concerning both the deepening and the enlargement of the EU. However, it is clear that the integration process has got over the deadlock and many reforms were launched or are expected to start. In parallel with negotiations on Brexit, the United Kingdom long hindered the preparation of small-scale reforms in the area of security and defence.

The contradictions regarding the EU's role as a global player primarily stem from the fact that, at the time of rivalry between great powers, the EU is expected to act as a great power on the international stage but it is not a great power. It is well known that the age of the great powers did not carry the values that the EU intends to convey as normative power. In line with the principled pragmatism of the Global Strategy, the EU wishes to defend liberal and democratic values and support multilateral institutions in the world order. On the other hand, decision-makers on EU level are increasingly aware that the EU cannot advance its interests without a realistic approach.

Member States themselves are not able to shape world politics, there is a need for the EU as a capable international player. In the absence of military force, the EU cannot become a real global player. Its external credibility is contested by both internal crises and capacity limitations. The question still remains whether all these contradictions will be resolved in the future (Molnár 2022).

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