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European Open Strategic Autonomy and an Anarchic International System

A Neorealist Analysis

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1. Introduction

The past decade has been a watershed for the history of the European Union and the international system. The Old Continent has been rocked by multiple crises since 2008 with seemingly increasing intensity; starting with the global economic downturn originating from the housing bubble bursting in the United States of America, the slump that occurred in Europe as a consequence was exacerbated by the beginning of a major refugee crisis starting due to the instability and conflicts that were ongoing in North Africa and the Near East. This crisis, in turn, led to a surge in right-wing populist sentiment to the benefit of the political parties and groups that could capitalise on these sentiments which contributed to real fears of Europe dissolving due to Euroscepticism.

Such fears are not entirely unfounded; the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland voted in 2016 to leave the EU: Brexit. The latest round of crisis then emerged in late-2019 from the People's Republic of China, where a new SARS virus emerged from Wuhan and led to an unprecedented pandemic, disrupting international commerce and finance and shutting down whole nations in an attempt to prevent its further spread.

In addition to (and interlinked with) these crises, geopolitical shifts came to the fore; for decades China used its status as the "world's factory" to fuel rapid modernisation and development. The growth of China into a world power was and is having a disruptive effect to the international system following the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc and the American unipolar order. This threat was quickly grasped by the US and starting with President Obama's *Pivot to Asia* and his successor, President Trump's, rapid escalation of the US-China rivalry, it became clear that the United States was no longer as interested in the Transatlantic Alliance: the Pacific would be the focus of American geopolitical policy. The European Union, benefitting from the off shoring that China provided, found stuck between China and the US as their rivalry was intensifying. The liberal, free-trade *rules-based* international order that was the bedrock of European international strategy was fast eroding.

We endeavour to find out, therefore, to what extent can the European Union's pursuit of Open Strategic Autonomy be explained through the lens of Neorealist theory.

1.1. Context

In the context of these concurrent geopolitical, social and economic crises an idea emerged from the various EU institutions: strategic autonomy.

Here we shall attempt to look at the definition of strategic autonomy.
The term is a fairly contested one and has evolved since first being named in 2013 as a strictly defence policy. But using the European Commission's own words, strategic autonomy is 'the EU's ability to make its own choices and shape the world around it through leadership and engagement, reflecting its strategic interests and values.' (TPR, 2021)
The language here reveals its geopolitical tensions. The EU seeks to be unfettered in its capacity to act within its own sphere, in addition to seeking being the dominant player within it. The definition implies something crucial to the EU's understanding of itself as a geopolitical player: it does not consider itself to have the ability to make its own choices and shape the world around it; it does not consider itself to be a leader within its own region. This is a significant admission and a significant development if it wishes to change this status quo.
Sino-European economic relations had grown immensely over previous decades; the European Union (EU) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) are two of the three largest economies in the world, their impact on global affairs both direct and indirect is vast. It stands to reason that two of the largest economies in history are incredibly interlinked and dependent on one another despite being located on opposite ends of the Eurasian landmass. By 2003, China was already Europe's third largest trading partner with two-way trade exceeding €115 billion in value.

The decade after, starting in 2013 would turn out to be a watershed in European, Chinese and global history. Faced with the aftermath of the global economic recession in 2008, the Eurozone crisis, the migrant crisis and attacks by terrorist organisations and Brexit, Europe spent the 2010s embattled putting out fires one after the other.

At the same time Xi Jinping was elected by the Communist Party conclave to become the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and was ratified as the President of China not long after. His presidency at the helm of what was rapidly becoming an economic juggernaut expected to overtake the United States of America (US) in the rapidly approaching future. At the same time, Trump's first presidency and is Make America Great

Again orientation was putting him at odds with the EU and NATO members. Following his presidency, the COVID-19 pandemic and Putin's invasion of Ukraine in quick succession brought home the necessity for Europe to start derisking its trade ties and rely less on America for its security.

The former US Secretary of Defence put it best when he quoted the influential George Shultz in saying that the world is awash with change. Recent developments all over the globe have demonstrated that after a brief recession, an era of Great Power international politics is (re)emerging.

However, the EU has not been a passive observer, in an effort to make up for the decade spent navigating these concurrent crises and make up for the time lost the EU has also started to break its own mould in terms of fundamental industrial, domestic and foreign policy objectives.

Global events are shifting the sands of the international arena demonstrating that this is a process of Great Power competition that is underway. The European Union's response: Open Strategic Autonomy. But what is the main motivator for this? Does the pursuit of strategic autonomy indicate a realist mindset framework.

1.1.1. Definitions of Strategic Autonomy

The definition of (Open) Strategic Autonomy (referred to as SA, EU-SA or OSA), or rather the way it has been envisaged by the European Union has changed over time. The earliest use of the term *Strategic Autonomy* in a European context was purely a defence term.

It was primarily defined as a collection of political initiatives to have a more autonomous European and home-grown European technological and industrial base in order to enhance its collaboration with its partners (i.e. the US et al); that is to say, the Europeans would be more in charge of their region without any major rupture with transatlantic allies that would focus more on the Asia-Pacific region. This position was in line with the consensus in Washington from both Democratic and Republican Parties at the time which strongly were in favour of maintaining the transatlantic partnership at the time.

From 2016 and first Trump administration, SA began to rapidly develop and expand its scope beyond the mere parameters of defence and took on a decidedly geopolitical definition.
With President Trump came a radical reconstruction of international relations. The prominent transactional approach taken by Trump towards transatlantic relations upended what was over half a century of close collaboration.

The insistence of Donald Trump's policy of abrupt departure from European defensive affairs caused a major crisis in Europe as, with the exception of France, few European states in NATO were meeting or capable of meeting at the time the required 2% of GDP spending on defence stated in the NATO treaty. The threat of US withdrawal would have left the European Union (with the majority of the Twenty-Seven being NATO members) completely defenceless save for the nuclear deterrent.

The sudden realisation that the EU and European NATO members could not rely on the United States indefinitely for its defence umbrella gave SA major competencies not initially envisaged. It is here, at this point, that SA became recognisably what it is: a geopolitical strategy of the European Union.

1.1.2. Why "Strategic Autonomy"?

One should ask "why choose the term *(Open) Strategic Autonomy*?" to qualify the new course being charted for the European Union? As it was initially, as was discussed, a way to describe ambitions of defence integration of allied European states, the term is presumably a description outlining the aim of lessening the European NATO militaries' dependency on the United States of America for its defence and military force. The phrase can quickly be adapted to a wider concept of lessening interdependencies on trade, finance et al.
But in order to see how the definition has evolved, some time must be taken to discuss the various debates that occurred and developed over the course of the decades from the birth of the European Union, its growth and integration of Eastern European states, and the subsequent growth of the EU into a major international, geopolitical player.

1.1.3. The Debate(s)

The ‘First Wave’ of the debate on SA started with the birth of the European Union; as far back as the 1998 British-French St Malo declaration that led to the creation of the Common Security and Defence Policy famously stated that ‘the Union must have the capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces, the means to decide to use them, and a readiness to do so, in order to respond to international crises,’ showing that the capacity to act independently was on the minds of the architects of the EU when it was first established. Further elaboration of this debate is, for the purpose of conciseness, not within the scope of this research.

It is following the growth of various crises within and at the borders of the EU at the beginning of the 2010s that the ‘Second Wave’ of debates evolved from the initial discussion of European military and defence autonomy; the debate arose from the growing momentum in the first part of the decade which saw the destabilising effects of the wars in Libya and Syria and the corresponding migration crisis which had a direct impact on the growth of Euroscepticism and extreme-right political parties’ success at the polls, as well as the crisis in Ukraine all of which showcased the harsh realities Europe faces in its neighbourhood. As a result, the 2016 EU global strategy called for an ‘appropriate level of ambition and strategic autonomy’ as the basis for ‘Europe’s ability to promote peace and security within and beyond its borders’. The strategy and the discussion on its implementation put the term into use in the EU’s policy discourse.

This would continue to evolve until the defining moment of the development of SA into an explicit geopolitical stance: the first Presidency of Donald J. Trump.

It was the seismic shift in international relations under President Trump’s first tenure that solidified SA as a key pillar of EU grand strategy instead of slowly withering away as yet another term to describe the EU’s defence ambitions. This started the ‘Third Wave’ of discussion on strategic autonomy. Not only did the Trump Presidency bring back lingering doubts about US commitment to European security, it also did not ‘shy away’ from using US economic power to ‘strong arm the EU with extraterritorial sanctions on Iran.’

It should be noted that the EU was fully expecting American disengagement for years at that point, as President Obama, Trump's predecessor, made it clear that the United States would "pivot to Asia" and the Indo-Pacific. What was truly a jolt to the Europeans was the suddenness of America's turning and outright hostility to the EU, at times referring to the former trans-Atlantic partner as a "competitor." What was expected to be a gradual transference of capability and competences to the EU as America turned its gaze across the Pacific (whilst presumably maintaining deep co-operation) was instead a complete volte-face and rejection of this partnership.

'Whether China's Belt and Road Initiative or US trade sanctions, geoeconomic power plays became more and more common. During the third wave of the strategic autonomy debate this geostrategic use of economic instruments became a pivotal point of discussion and risked limiting the EU's freedom to operate.'

1.2. The Implication

The European Union in International Relations, cannot be defined as a state. However, despite this, it is represented in international affairs, it has and receives ambassadors, it negotiates trade agreements on behalf of its Member States etc. It therefore can be said to have a certain degree of statehood.
Yet if it behaves as an actor with features of statehood in the international order, does it behave in other ways as a state does in the international system? Is strategic autonomy a grand strategy in the vein of powers? Can the EU be analysed as a state or great power in the international system?

The question at the crux of this research is:

To what extent can the European Union's pursuit of Open Strategic Autonomy (2013–2025) be explained through the lens of Neorealist theory as a defensive response to systemic pressures in an increasingly anarchic international order?

2. Research Structure

2.1. Theoretical Framework

This paper will take 2013 as the logical starting point for two reasons.
Firstly, 2013 was the year in which strategic autonomy was first used officially in an EU document:

'European defence technological and industrial base' that can 'enhance its strategic autonomy and its ability to act with partners.' (European Council, 2013)
But the use of the phrase strategic autonomy, as mentioned, had not yet taken the connotation now associated with it: European sovereignty; geopolitical manoeuvrability; European techno-industrial independence. It is a concept that has evolved as the EU has evolved in order to face the challenges of a rather tumultuous period.

Secondly, 2013 is the year that Xi Jinping ascended to the Presidency of the PRC, confirming his paramount status after being elected General Secretary a few months prior and setting off a new era for China's position on the world stage; a position that would see her play an ever-prominent role in world affairs and, as a consequence, come to be explicitly seen as a systemic rival.

Therefore, 2013 would be a good starting point to see how the concept of strategic autonomy developed in response to global challenges faced by the European Union.

It also allows a direct comparison to be made between the initial conception of SA and how the first Trump Presidency shaped Europe's approach to establishing autonomy, and further developments of the COVID-19 pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation.

Therefore, this research will be look into strategic autonomy until the beginning of the Second Trump Presidency in 2025.

We believe this to be a sufficient period to see the development of European strategic autonomy, as well as to ensure that the research is concise and focused.

In carrying out this research, an Offensive (Neo)Realist lens will be utilised to analyse the as championed by John Mearsheimer. Neorealism's assertion that the international order is fundamentally anarchic and the implication that states and sovereign entities therefore seek to ensure the stability and continuity in this anarchic order fits neatly into the rapid change of the international order that is currently underway. Following this, the EU as an entity with state-like qualities that operates on the internation scene, the hypothesis is, that it, therefore, is just as beholden to realist pressures as any other sovereign actor in the international system; as such, the EU's policy of Open Strategic Autonomy can be explained as a reaction to these shifts and the desire to first and foremost protect its existence.

2.2. Basis of Research

The impact of the European Union's pivot towards a policy such as Open Strategic Autonomy has led to a flourishing of literature on this subject; various different institutes, academies and think tanks are seemingly working around the clock as the constantly shifting landscape of the world system shifts how OSA is perceived and how it should be implemented.

Of the most active institutions publishing studies on the topics surrounding the European drive to OSA: the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS); the European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS); Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (German Institute for International and Security Affairs); the Belgian Egmont–Royal Institute for International Relations; the Clingendael Netherlands Institute of International Relations etc.

In addition to these organisations, numerous journals and institutions supplement the research of the those mentioned above such as the European Foreign Affairs Review, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), European Security, Contemporary Politics, the Journal of Common Market Studies (JCMS), the Journal of Common Market Studies (JCMS) and the Chaillot Papers of the Egmont Institute.

Crucial to any analysis of EU-SA, is the voice of the EU itself. Publications of various European Institutions, bodies and politicians provide an enormous body of literature which can be analysed and reviewed. The different qualities of these publications can also yield important insights; different bodies specialise in different areas and so reviewing the commonalities and divergences between how different institutions are reacting to the challenges of the shifting geopolitical situation, and, importantly, how they conceive of an autonomously acting EU would undoubtedly reveal crucial depth to better understand the forces at play. Similarly, the different reports sent between the various European Union institutions would demonstrate not only the issues that arise from different positions and interpretations of Open Strategic Autonomy but how the EU has a whole is responding to divergences and smoothing them out in order to formulate a coherent and united policy-making front. Thus, this corpus is of vital importance especially in analysing the language and intent that the EU has in regards to this policy, and as such the value of the myriads of papers, publications, speeches and communiqués cannot be overstated; it is the European Union itself declaring its point of view and ambitions.

The extant literature acknowledges the importance of China's development and rise to great power status as being a major contributing factor to the EU's shift from a highly open and cooperative economic, trade and financial bloc to one that is guarding and reinforcing certain key industries in order to avoid – as best as it can – the repercussions of more bellicose relations between the United States of America and the PRC: two nations which the EU is highly interconnected with.

But there is one notable aspect that should be noted. Existing literature, especially more recently published ones, stress the impact of the United States' foreign and domestic policies as just as influential in pushing the EU to adopt strategic autonomy as a policy directive.

The literature, therefore, brings up an important facet when looking at the roots of Open Strategic Autonomy: The American Factor. However, whilst the increasing unreliability of the US is one catalyst, it could be argued to not be the only cause.

One of the most serious geopolitical crises Europe has had to face has been the invasion of Ukraine by a revisionist Putin. The eruption of the first major land war on the European

continent is a classic case study for international relations, and the gravity of which, as academics have noted, has pushed SA to an even more concrete form of a grand strategy.

Owing to the fact that this is a topic that is still playing out and the destination of strategic autonomy is years, perhaps decades, from being known, the existing corpus of literature is healthy and growing as this is an ongoing position that the EU is constructing. However, much of what is analysed is rather descriptive and with the description of the impacts being quasi-hypothetical (it is though impossible to ascertain or know with any firm clarity as to where OSA will lead) rather than analytical. We know what the EU intends to do, but how it does it, how feasible it is and, moreover, what does this reveal about the EU's self-perception and self-conception, as well as how it perceives and conceives world events and state actors. It is clear that due to its relative novelty and youth, much still has yet to be analysed regarding what Open Strategic Autonomy truly means.

2.3. Methodology

The following section will outline the methodological approach that shall be taken in this research investigating the role geopolitical pressures play on the development of Open Strategic Autonomy. In order to answer this question, the angle of approach must be discussed before going into detail as to the proposed way this paper's research will be carried out.

We shall pursue this research through a chronological look at the different periodisation of (Open) Strategic Autonomy: from its early inception to its most modern form.

In doing so, the different periods and events between 2013 and 2025 can be contrasted against each other and the theoretical analysis can take place. At each point, references will be made to policy papers and the European Institutions (and their representatives) to outline the changes and developments occurring before being fitted into a neorealist framework to demonstrate the EU's response as exhibiting behaviours associated with states in the international system and defend the capability of neorealism to describe the nature of Open Strategic Autonomy as it progresses.

2.4. Research Design

Since the purpose of this paper is to research and analyse the development and influence of increasing anarchy in the international system on the EU's policies, this manner in which this is pursued must logically reflect this aim; the research will be primarily be based on a combination of policy and discourse analyses which would ideally yield valuable insights into the way the EU perceives itself and its actions which, as a consequence, would allow the inner logic and impetus for these policies to be clarified and determined.

This requires a vast compendium of published literature from various EU institutions and bodies in order to compile a large data set so as to improve the scientific qualities of this research and in order to come to a conclusion that is accurate and well-founded. The sources of different institutions will be compared to ascertain any divergences or differences in interpretations or differences in policy goals which can then be compared with later developments which will aid in determining how the OSA policy develops over the course of a decade.

The literature will not be limited strictly to publications from the European Commission, for example, or this or that agency; special attention will also be paid to speeches and statements made by key representatives and leaders in Europe owing to the fact that these figures represent and embody the European Union: they are the bridge between the population and indeed, the wider world, and the EU as a multi-national state structure. Therefore, the discourse from these figures will be analysed, the figures being (but not limited to):

- President(s) of the European Commission: Jean-Claude Junker and Ursula von der Leyen;
- European Commissioners for Trade (ECT): Cecilia Malmström and Valdis Dombrovskis;
- High Representatives of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR): Federica Mogherini and Josep Borrell Fontelles;

Owing to the five-year terms, references will be made if needed to their predecessors; in addition to the above-mentioned figures, other representatives like various EU Commissioners will have their discourse on European strategic autonomy analysed if considered to be appropriate and necessary.

Through discourse analysis, it is hoped that the conception and development of OSA can be ascertained and linked to developments in the international system.

In addition to the EU institutions and bodies, it must be remembered that the European Union is made up of a number of sovereign states, each of whom have their own foreign and domestic policies which often take a more prominent place in the nation's political environment than EU-wide concerns. This is also a facet that must be considered as the EU is not a federated state but a collection of nation states that legally cooperate and are integrated in many respects but also are still independent and sovereign. The conflict between the EU as a body and the member-states' national policies is also an intriguing avenue; this added aspect creates an enriching corpus and ensuring nuanced and accurate results.

In order to avoid the research being bloated and unfocused, this will be restricted to a certain degree. The reference to individual member governments and their reactions to European strategic autonomy must, out of necessity, be limited to certain case studies to affirm an interpretation of the intent of European Union or a certain institution with their announcement or publication; or indeed, offer contextual insight into the state of affairs regarding the EU and the still-forming OSA. To mention more than it is necessary would without doubt risk the objective of this paper and draw its focus away: in order to remain consistent, the limiting to certain, appropriate case studies must be adhered to.

Moreover, whenever possible there shall be an effort made to incorporate as much quantitative data as possible where appropriate in order to enhance and reinforce the findings for what will be primarily a qualitatively based research.

The results of these analyses shall then be interpreted through the theoretical framework, mentioned previously, of the neorealist school.

As with any research there are indeed issues and limitations inherent to such an endeavour. One problem is the European Union itself; the EU is a supra-national entity which whilst behaving as a sovereign entity on the world stage and is an economic bloc of highly interconnected states, is still a collection of equally sovereign states. Such a state of existence yields an argument that the neorealist conception of the international system made up of sovereign nation-states does not fit neatly with and does not apply to the European Union

owing to it not being a traditional state-actor; whilst there are limitations owing to this, and this is apparent in cases where the EU's policies chafe and come into conflict with the interests of its member nations, it could be argued that the drive to achieve strategic autonomy is proof of the applicability of neorealism to understanding this emerging policy and that the EU is a sufficiently sovereign and independent enough actor to be considered a sovereign entity in the international system, after all the European Union has the power to negotiate trade and economic treaties, has internal legislative powers that override the national legislation of its Member States, is represented as if it were a state in multiple international fora, having ambassadors to sovereign states and the United Nations and sits in global bodies such as the G7 and the WTO as an independent entity.

Similarly, there will undoubtedly be limitations owing to the OSA's relative novelty; it has only been several years where strategic autonomy has been developed and coherent enough to be pursued as a strategic policy objective for the EU. As such, there are restricted data, especially regarding trade between EU, China, and/or the United States, investment figures and the impact that implemented policies have on these owing to the fact that the long-term effects are yet to manifest. Furthermore, OSA is not one specific policy or law but a combination of a multitude of interlocking policies, laws and directives being implemented over an extended period of time which limits the possible insights that can be gleaned as this is still an ongoing process rather than an event. Due to these factors, this research should not be considered to be exhaustive; rather, this should be seen as an addition to the still growing literature that is arising as Open Strategic Autonomy continues to develop and be implemented.

3. Early Strategic Autonomy (2013-2016)

Since its inception, the European Union has been an entity that has seen itself as an agent in the international arena. The coagulation of the EU from an international regulator of European coal and steel markets to a continent-wide trading bloc intertwined politically and economically was done out of an impetus of being able to respond to and act upon international and geopolitical developments. Far from an accident, it was a conscious development by the original architects of the Union.

Being able to ‘to make its own choices and shape the world around it’ (TPR, 2021) is, logically, one of the fundamentals required for the creation of a sovereign or, (more appropriately for the Union), an international/geopolitical actor.

But Strategic Autonomy as a phrase and the corresponding associations that come along with it did not always exist and even in its early conception was a much more muted policy compared to what it has currently grown to. Although references to an autonomous security and defence policy were made mention of as far back as the St. Malo Declaration between the United Kingdom and France, the first use of the phrase *strategic autonomy* appears to be in the EU Council conclusions on EU common security and defence policy (CSDP) in December of 2013 (Damen, 2022). In the conclusion, strategic autonomy is seen as a development of the transatlantic relationship and a deepening of it along with a deepening of inter-European co-operation being defined as a ‘defence technological and industrial base' that can 'enhance its strategic autonomy and its ability to act with partners.’ (European Council, 2013)

The mention of partners is significant as it indicates that the concept was not yet considered to be a grand strategy but a policy that limited to defence and security that compliments the long-established relationship between European states and the rest of NATO.

The term continued to be used infrequently when it came to EU affairs, with the next major usage of it being in 2016 in the EU Global Strategy paper which outlined the EU’s international objectives wherein the phrase was used four times. Since then, the use of it has

greatly multiplied and expanded in meaning which is where Strategic Autonomy first starts taking its present shape. (Damen, 2022)

Why the strategy was formulated and why was it not developed earlier is not within the scope of this work; however, why it was a relatively minor buzzword initially and ballooned to the lynchpin of EU grand strategy is a noteworthy look into the policy goals of the EU and its Member States before 2016 and after.

Like all political decisions and objectives of the EU, SA was a contentious and fraught policy that issued diverging opinions based on the national strategies of countries within the Union. For France, this was a highly agreeable policy from its very beginning (Faure, 2024). France has long had an independent streak within the Western countries and often saw itself as being (or should be) the main military and strategic power in Europe. The creation of a common EU defence and strategy framework would have placed France at its centre owing to its military capabilities (Faure, 2024). This would have placed smaller and/or less military capable nations in Europe under the direction of France who would presumably have differing priorities and concerns. This was especially prominent in Eastern Europe and the Baltics who overwhelmingly favoured a continued Transatlantic security umbrella as their concerns were dictated by the Russian Federation which under Putin had been developing a reputation of Revanchism- something which may not be of concern to France which being situated on the Atlantic coast of Europe would have considered Russian covert and overt attacks to be a distant affair.

This reveals that despite the Union being an independent actor in the international arena, there are firm geopolitical divergences between its constituent states which remain sovereign under international law. As such, what is demonstrated here is a clear tension between these states which under a neorealist lens demonstrate that the overriding factor in how these states calculate their policymaking i.e. the key tenet of what drives a state's behaviour and policy decisions, is the self-preservation of that state. To Poland, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Finland et al. the overriding concern was how to maintain their sovereignty bordering an ambitious Kremlin, (Damen, 2022) which has repeatedly demonstrated its willingness to use both covert methods and overt military action to subjugate or neutralise a neighbouring country or internal region as had been demonstrated in Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova and Chechnya. A strategic autonomy directed by a France which naturally would hold a major sway on the

security and defence policies in Europe would risk undermining focus on these concerns. Furthermore, effectiveness would risk dilution as the Member States would each attempt to have their strategic objective addressed which would weaken unity and resolve as decision-making would be hampered by the many voices within the Union. (idem)

These issues have not yet been fully resolved, ‘even today, some Member States still consider the concept of EU-SA in defence matters with suspicion,’ (idem) but SA has since grown to encompass far more than mere security and defence co-operation. Since 2017 a clear shift in the framing of SA has developed, one that emphasises supply chains, industrial reshoring, further EU integration and geopolitical ambitions. (idem)

3.1. Growing Concerns with China

Since the opening up of China, the economic and commercial relationship between her and the EU (and its predecessors) has become the largest trade relationship in history, with the European Union becoming China's biggest trading partner and China being the EU's second largest by 2017. The trade in goods between the two in that year had reached over EUR 1.5 billion every single day. (Juncker, 2017a)

However, despite the EU being the largest actor in international trade, its share in global imports and exports had fallen from ~41% in 2004 to ~33% by 2020, although still accounting for a third of global trade. (Fronczek, 2022) During this same period, China demonstrated a meteoric rise in its share of both global exports and imports: its share in exports rose from 6.4% in 2004 to 14.7% in 2020; imports rose from 5.9% to 11.5%. (Fronczek, 2022)

Trade between the two was a major driver in the global economy, however what was becoming a major concern for Europe was that trade with China was characterised by a rapidly growing negative balance. In 2004, the deficit in the EU’s foreign trade with China has exceeded USD 100 billion. By 2020, it had almost tripled and reached USD 300 billion. (Fronczek, 2022)

By the period being investigated, China's economic practices, especially growing concerns over subsidies and dumping. This was openly opined by the then President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, especially over the overproduction of steel:

'... it is a very serious problem for Europe and for the Europeans. The overcapacity of China is exactly twice the entire steel production of Europe, which is demonstrating what kind of problem we have to face.' (Juncker, 2016)

This period reflects the general continuation of the EU's emphasis on a neoliberal framework of continued engagement, deepening trade and financial ties and reinforced multilateralism as the motor of alignment between the major economies of the world in order to propulse internal reforms and democratisation. The relationship between the People's Republic and the EU is described as being founded on a shared commitment to openness and working together as *'part of a rules-based international system'* [my emphasis] wherein together the two can promote prosperity and sustainability at home and abroad. The emphasis is on continuing reform and multilateralism:

'We applaud the ambition of China's reform path. We recognise that reforms have been made and that plans have been established. But we would like to see implementation speed up – so that your policies are in line with your world vision.' (European Commission, 2017)

The 19th EU-China Summit announced a flurry of agreements and memoranda of understanding aiming to deepening ties with China:

- The European Investment Fund (EIF), part of the European Investment Bank Group, and China's Silk Road Fund (SRF) signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the aim of jointly investing in private equity and venture capital funds that will, in turn, invest in small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) located primarily in the EU with the total expected commitment amounting to €500 million, of which €250 million would be financed from the EIF and €250 million from the SRF;
- The Strategic Framework for Customs Cooperation for the years 2018 – 2020, was signed between the EC and China, setting out the priorities and objectives for EU-China customs cooperation for the years ahead, focusing on areas of citizens protection and combating illegal trade. Additionally, support for continued

cooperation on supply chain security while facilitating reliable traders, the enforcement of Intellectual Property Rights, and the fight against financial and environmental fraud was agreed;

- Commissioner Malmström and her Chinese counterpart, the Minister of Commerce, Mr Zhong Shan, signed documents covering the protection of intellectual property and geographical indications. An important development that had been in the works since 2013, to improve on addressing legal challenges faced by EU businesses in China;
- In the agricultural sector, an agreement was signed committing both the European Union and China to publish, on 3 June, a list of one hundred European and Chinese geographical indications. This publication sought to open the process for protecting the listed products against imitations and usurpations with the expectation in reciprocal trade benefits and increased consumer awareness and demand for high-quality products. (idem)

This is some of the bilateral agreements made at this summit, but it demonstrates that the European Union, as represented by the Commissioners and the President of the EC, still sought to engage China and deepen its commercial links and find a solution to what it considered to be unfair practices by the Chinese side.

These agreements are in line with the Council of the European Union conclusions on the *EU Strategy on China* which emphasised the major opportunities for cooperation with China, further engaging China in its reform process in a way which 'ensures openness, a level playing field, and genuine mutual benefits,' (Council of the European Union, 2016) along with working alongside Beijing to promote 'global public goods, sustainable development and international security, and to address global and regional challenges within the multilateral system.' (idem)

4. Developed Strategic Autonomy (2017-2020)

4.1. EU-SA Coagulating

At the time (the first year in which the EU Global Strategy plans were supposed to start being implemented) the EU-SA was still being commented on critically by academia, especially on the cost and the feasibility the EU would even be capable of achieving a fraction of its goals; despite this, however, momentum was accelerating. The first signal that SA was becoming a cornerstone of EU grand strategy was Macron's speech at the Sorbonne in September of 2017 which emphasised the international situation and the urgency of the European Union preparing itself for them by being rebuilt as 'a sovereign, united and democratic Europe' as 'the Europe of today is too weak, too slow, too inefficient, but Europe alone can enable us to take action in the world, in the face of the big contemporary challenges.' (Macron, 2017)

His speech explicitly referenced 'nationalism, identitarianism, protectionism and isolationist sovereignism,' (idem) as challenges to overcome. The context surrounding this was pivotal – following Brexit, the migrant crisis, the first Presidency of Donald Trump and his America First policy and an ever-expanding Chinese economy – the EU was being buffeted on all sides. Tensions were increasing and the old, "rules-based," heavily institutionalised international structures of which the EU was a key part of and highly dependent on were unravelling.

One crucial development which may be seen as instrumental in the evolution of EU-SA to a grand strategy was the bombastic threats of President Trump to withhold funding to NATO and institute tariffs of EU trade – which he did indeed implement (Harte, 2018a): a major threat and completely abrupt and unforeseen policy position. The decades-long stability of the transatlantic relationship was suddenly upended, and the EU and NATO had to contend with a US administration which was no longer concerned with European affairs and focused exclusively on great power competition with the People's Republic of China. These were not wholly unexpected developments, as mentioned above, President Obama's *Pivot to Asia* was clear that the Americans' primary geopolitical focus would be on the Pacific and a rising China. The shock was that it was expected that EU and European NATO members would slowly build up their own capacity to at least reduce the burden on Washington of maintaining the security umbrella in Europe, all the while maintaining the transatlantic

relationship. Now Washington was openly threatening that should its allies not pay their "fair share," it could even unilaterally withdraw from NATO.

Whilst Macron's speech was creating ripples (mostly in France), think tanks were still exploring the full significance of EU-SA in this new era of international politics. Already by 2016, owing to the civil wars in Libya and Syria, and the Ukraine Crisis which demonstrated the 'harsh realities Europe faces in its neighbourhood,' the EU global strategy announcement of that year called for 'an appropriate level of ambition and strategic autonomy' as the foundation for Europe's ability to 'promote peace and security within *and beyond its borders*' (my emphasis added). This propelled SA into a strategy and the discussion on its implementation into the EU's policy discourse. Significantly, this came the year of Donald Trump's first election as President of the United States, ensuring that this interpretation would continue, expand and become the cornerstone of the European Union's present grand strategy.

4.2. Expanding Scope

By 2019, SA – still primarily seen as a (mostly) defence initiative – had started to encompass wider interrelated topics: 'economy, energy supply and a strategic role for the euro as an international currency.' (Damen, 2022) Economics and energy security is present in almost all discussions of SA– although the role of the euro is considered a more sensitive area – which demonstrates a shift to a more strategic approach to EU-SA. (idem) By 2019, strategic autonomy was becoming a more expansive concept, with proponents and academics emphasising the need for the EU to find Europe's place and purpose in a hardening global context. (Grevi, 2019) Underlining that the economy, technology, and security and defence as the 'principal domains of EU-SA.' (Damen, 2022)

The highlighting of the economy and technology as of equal importance to security and defence (which were initially the primary focus of SA) demonstrates that the preceding years' debates had caused Strategic Autonomy to start forming into an EU-wide grand strategy even if as late as 2019 Paris was considered by many member states 'as the main proponent of ESA – partly because European strategic autonomy is a development of the French idea of "strategic autonomy".' (Franke & Varma, 2019)

4.3. A World Awash with Change

The maturing of ESA cannot be explained without first analysing the changes to the international system which were accelerating at the time. Whilst, of course, there was no single reason or definitive epistemological break that caused strategic autonomy to become as important as it is, it could be argued that many shifts in the international order which eventually reached an inflection point around this time and served as a catalyst accelerating its development and adoption as the European Union as a geopolitical actor needed a manner to maintain its global position as the unipolar moment started to unravel.

The existence of the European Union presents – somewhat of – an anomaly for realist scholars of International Relations (Andreatta & Zambernardi, 2023) as the bloc acts a geopolitical actor – made up of still legally sovereign states – in the international system. This presents some challenges in how to exactly define it:

- Is it an independent actor akin to a state?
- Is it an international organisation?
- Is it a confederation?
- Is it merely a vehicle to express common interests of member states?

Not a nation-state but made up of nation-states, yet more than an international organisation: a true conundrum.

However, despite these clearly important issues, the EU when it comes to the international system is a player – and a decisive one at that – as it has the power to negotiate trade and economic treaties, has internal legislative powers and is represented as if it were a state in multiple international fora, having ambassadors to sovereign states and the United Nations, sitting in global bodies such as the G7 and the WTO as an independent entity, negotiating trade deals on behalf of its Member States, and the President of the European Commission and President of the Council of the European Union both acting as heads of state/governments as representatives for Europe as a collective. As such, whilst the traditional view is that the EU is sui generis a unique entity owing to its state-like features despite not being a state, it can feasibly be analysed as a state might be in international relations. (Odermatt, 2024)

4.4. Mounting International Pressures and Neorealism

The rapid changes occurring in the international system has led to the European Union being buffeted by multiple existential threats that – now qualified with the word *"Open"* – *Strategic Autonomy* seeks to respond to. In the field of military power and security, the Russian Federation is the most pressing concern owing to her revisionist foreign policy, presenting a direct threat to European security and continental peace. Escalating military interventions in Georgia, Syria and Ukraine revealed the willingness of the Russian government to use military force to which the EU cannot effectively respond to as it is too politically fragmented and its constituent states were reliant on the US and NATO umbrella for their defence needs.

This posed little issue until the inauguration of President Trump in 2016 who pursued an explicit policy of American disengagement in Europe, emphasising the need that Europe had to take up an increased share of the military burden as the Trump administration and the United States began to focus on China and the Pacific region in earnest. In addition to this, the Trump administration also made it clear that the EU was to be considered an economic competitor – throwing another complication to the situation – the EU was now being threatened to both its East and West.

If in order to preserve its security, the European Union must build up its military capacity independently of the US, open strategic autonomy is the policy that would ensure its survival in an anarchic international system – the primary concern of any state according to neorealists. Thus, to understand the EU's adoption of strategic autonomy, one has to look at these pressures, gain an understanding of why these pressures have driven the EU's decision to pursue an autonomous path.

In the (neo-)realist school of international relations, the international system is understood to be anarchic – this is the 'first assumption.' This 'does not mean that it is chaotic or riven by disorder,' but rather is an 'ordering principle' which asserts that as the system is comprised of independent states that have no central authority above them. 'Sovereignty, in other words, inheres in states because there is no higher ruling body in the international system. There is no "government over governments."' (Mearsheimer, 2001) This obviously is of great importance to the European Union which frequently comes to odds with the national interests of these sovereign states and must manage it to the best of its ability. Strategic autonomy,

aiming to deal with the ambitions of non-EU states in the international system, is also a method of mitigating the national interests of Member States, who each individually would be unable to assert their independence from a revisionist Russia or a more mercantilely-bellicose United States. It would be considered counter-intuitive: surely national interests override the interests of the EU?

But co-operation between individually weaker states (like the co-operation that led to the EU) acts a force multiplier *so long as it is successful* – if strategic autonomy cannot be successfully implemented, it risks the Member States seeking the maintenance of their sovereignty elsewhere – thus, ESA is a prerequisite for the EU to continue existing in the international system. This last point is Mearsheimer's Fourth Assumption: 'survival is the primary goal of great powers.' (idem) Owing to the global return of great power politics, the EU is facing competition in trade from the United States and China, and militarily from Russia (made worse, as mentioned before, by Trump's refusal to continue being the major financier and supplier of NATO). If the EU cannot respond to these challenges effectively, it will unravel and cease to exist: the exact opposite of self-preservation.

The Second Assumption is the initial focus of ESA, military and defensive capabilities – specifically, 'great powers inherently possess some offensive military capability, which gives them the wherewithal to hurt and possibly destroy each other'- states with military capabilities have the potential to attack another state, albeit with limitations: 'some states have more military might than others and are therefore more dangerous.' (idem) Here one can see the identify the severe weakness of the EU as not only a great power but as an international actor: its relative *lack of* military strength.

Although most Member States are NATO members (and most candidate states are also within the NATO umbrella), the EU itself has little military power as its capabilities are divided between its constituent Members – some of whom have widely diverging offensive capabilities – and therefore any offensive and defensive power the EU has is fragmented in comparison to the large and, crucially, united *national* militaries of China, Russia and America.

France remains the EU's largest and most developed military power; Germany since the end of the Cold War has neglected its military capabilities and as a consequence faces deep

structural challenges in rebuilding and rearming herself; Poland fields a large and well-equipped conventional force with rising expenditure leading it to becoming a leading force in Europe; Italy and Spain also field armies with significant clout but both with a small reserve pool limiting long-term effectiveness in the event of a major conflict; the other militaries of Europe are comparatively smaller and more specialised owing to demographic and financial constraints.

The disparities between the different states of the EU's armies are a major strategic weakness. Each country's respective defence forces are the sovereign prerogative of the respective State (arguably being the most tangible guarantor of sovereignty), and as a consequence few large states wish to dilute and merge its military with another. As such, the EU's potential response to a conflict with a Kremlin that wishes to redraw the borders of Europe, or its response to a possible NATO conflict in the Pacific with China would be feeble at best. This is a key issue 'states seek to maintain their territorial integrity and the autonomy of their domestic political order.' (Mearsheimer, 2001) If there is no effective military to prevent the undermining of its territorial or political integrity, then the actor can only exist in the international sphere only as long as another power does not directly attack it. An effective military bulwark is therefore a necessity for the long-term survival of a state-actor; the development of a cohesive military policy, and the industrial and financial requirements that that entails, is a cornerstone of ESA and was its initial focus.

The Third Assumption can explain the sudden impetus of the European Union for the drive to achieve its strategic autonomy. According to the Realist School of IR 'states can never be certain about other states' intentions.' More specifically: *'no state can be sure that another state will not use its offensive military capability to attack the first state.'* Owing to this, a state in the international system must be prepared for the potentiality of another state attacking it. (idem)

Mearsheimer emphasises that this is not to say that 'states necessarily have hostile intentions.'

'Indeed, all of the states in the system may be reliably benign, but it is impossible to be sure of that judgment because intentions are impossible to divine with 100 percent certainty. There are many possible causes of aggression, and no state can be sure that another state is not motivated by one of them.' (idem)

This is of significance as the recent changes to the international system have been remarkably explicit. Russia under Vladimir Putin has become increasingly willing to exert its presence militarily in the international arena; China's explicit goal is to become a peer to the United States and usher in a "multipolar world order"; and President Trump almost overnight has declared the European Union to no longer be a close partner and ally but a leech and a net drain on American resources.

This last point was emphasised as an important underlying part of the third assumption:

'Furthermore, intentions can change quickly, so a state's intentions can be benign one day and hostile the next. Uncertainty about intentions is unavoidable, which means that states can never be sure that other states do not have offensive intentions to go along with their offensive capabilities.' (idem)

Whilst it would be unthinkable that President Trump would declare war on the European NATO states for not pulling their weight, he and his administration have pursued aggressive policies to address what they consider to be an imbalance in the trade relations between the EU and the US, such as the instituting of tariffs on steel and aluminium imports from the EU on the 1st of June 2018. This was a major blow to the EU as it is primarily a trading power and one of the world's largest and most valuable markets. Treating an ostensible ally in this manner is an incredible volte-face which emphasises the uncertainty inherent in the international system and which strengthens the drive towards adopting a less-US dependent military relationship, a less-Russia dependent energy relationship, et cetera.

The fifth and last assumption is that 'great powers are rational actors.' The EU, being 'aware of [its] external environment' pursues a grand strategy that seeks to respond to it. (idem) As the European Union until now had faced a certain international environment it has been caught on the backfoot and other Great Powers have taken advantage of that; from their perspective, the EU is not in a position to adequately and effectively respond to their actions. The EU, considering 'the preferences of other states and how their own behaviour is likely to affect the behaviour of those other states' (idem) is attempting to build its military, industrial and financial autonomy in order to effectively respond to the ambitions of other powers – the EU has seen how the behaviour of those other states has undermined its geopolitical position and this behaviour has affected their own strategy for survival: strategic autonomy. In

addition, since ‘states pay attention to the long term as well as the immediate consequences of their actions,’ the EU’s decision to derisk its economy and military is a long-term ambition of protecting its integrity. (idem)

4.5. The United States and the Trump Administration: The Shift from Atlanticism to Europeanism

One of the clearest developments in the European Union’s international relations is the United States and the Trump Question.

The goal of ‘securing European strategic autonomy is not new.’ (S.Lavery et al., 2022), European politicians have endeavoured to build autonomy whilst continuing to align with America (Lavery & Schmid, 2021). The European Project, after all, owes its inception to American engagement in Western Europe following the Second World War. But with the reconstruction of Western Europe, there simultaneously arose alternative regional bloc which theoretically could come to oppose the United States and the Atlantic framework it had constructed (S.Lavery et al., 2022) The European opposition to Atlanticism is said to contain two interconnected facets: geopolitical and geoeconomic. (idem) The first encompasses defence, foreign policy and geopolitics, centring on Europe’s position within the Atlantic security framework. The second, the geoeconomic, encompasses questions of political economy and the degree to which Europe should be open to global market forces (idem) Historically, the Atlanticists and neoliberal visions of Europe’s have usually held more sway than the Europeanists (Van Apeldoorn, 2002).

The discourse surrounding strategic autonomy mirrors the two distinct schools of thought regarding Europe’s security and defence policy (S.Lavery et al., 2022). The Europeanist approach, traditionally promoted by France and EU policy makers, seek for a more independent approach that reduce dependence on NATO. The Atlanticist approach, championed by Northern and Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, prefer the maintenance of the transatlantic umbrella, led by the United States. Tensions between the Europeanist and Atlanticist lenses/outlooks have been ‘at loggerheads’ throughout the entire lifespan of European integration. (idem)

While an autonomous Europe did not arise (and seemed moribund with the collapse of the Eastern Bloc), these tensions did not entirely disappear (idem); the Europeanist position was in retreat but was never dead. Its survival meant that it could – and, as we shall see, would – be revived. Following the end of the Cold War there was uncertainty in both Europe and the United States over the future of NATO. This uncertainty caused old tensions to remerge within the context of the establishment of the EU's CSDP (Menon, 2016, pp. 220–221). Europe's developing defence and security policy, once again demonstrating the influence of the Atlanticists, was explicitly conceived as the strengthening of the European pillar of NATO, which was further reinforced by the Lisbon Treaty and the accession of the pro-American Central and Eastern European states (S.Lavery et al., 2022)

The dichotomy between the Europeanist and Atlanticist positions within European security and defence policy re-erupted once Donald Trump first became the American president. The new administration sought to redefine the US's role in the international arena, expressing outright hostility towards the European project and frustration at the limited contribution of its member states to NATO's military budget (S.Lavery et al., 2022) In this context, European leaders became more vocal about the need to adopt a more assertive and independent posture regarding their collective foreign and security policies. The clearest and most vocal of these leaders was the newly elected President Macron who, as part of his broader vision of a re-energised European project, called for the strengthening of European defence capabilities and radical overhaul of military procurement so as to secure 'industrial and technological autonomy' (Ministère des Armées, 2017) based on what Macron noted at the time that Trump I represented a break from the US' traditional support of the EU (The Economist, 2019). Owing to the necessity of an intergovernmental approach, Macron reached out to Germany for a 'new partnership' which sought to push forward European integration further (SWP, 2021).

This launch to create a "geopolitical Europe" quickly found consensus among the key leaders of the nations of the Union and within the European Institutions themselves. Macron was joined by the then German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, who in 2017 already showed the beginnings of a previously unthinkable rupture with the staunch pro-US Atlanticism that defined the post-war Federal Republic of Germany's foreign and security policies when the Chancellor admitted that the 'times in which [Europe] could completely rely on others are long gone' (FAZ, 2017). The growth of a more geopolitically oriented Europe manifested

itself in a range of different initiatives which were explicitly framed around strategic autonomy. In the area of defence coordination, progress was made in specifying the criteria for the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) as a keystone in Europe's CSDP (S.Lavery et al., 2022) The European Defence Industrial Development Programme (EDIDP) and the EDF were established and joint military procurement projects were launched to reduce Europe's reliance on US technology as well as developing an autonomous military-industrial base (DGAP, 2020).

Nevertheless, countries in Eastern Europe bordering Russia, like Poland, and the Baltic states, voiced concerns that the move towards SA would weaken the transatlantic alliance and reduce the US's presence on the continent which would be dangerous for their national security (DGAP, 2021). This opposition derailed the push that Macron had been building towards and left strategic autonomy half-developed as its momentum had stalled. (S.Lavery et al., 2022)

It is clear that the overwhelming concern within Europe regarding SA – whether from a Europeanist or Atlanticist perspective – was the reaction of Trump towards this move. From the Europeanist point of view, Trump and the US could no longer be seen as staunch allies to the EU and Europe, indeed, Trump should be considered a threat for vocally calling for the dissolution of the Transatlantic Partnership. Conversely, the Atlanticists viewed the rapid push towards SA to be needlessly antagonising US interests and that under Trump, certain measures of appeasement must be made to keep the Americans engaged in Europe and NATO; additionally, should Europe go at it alone, its military centre of gravity would shift to France, whose president was the most vocal proponent of this strategic shift, and the fear would be the subordination of national interests to a French one. In this case, keeping the Americans on board would still allow a balance to ensure national interests are not sacrificed. It should also be mentioned that, especially in Germany, the idea that the Trump presidency was an aberration led to a strong sense that history would not repeat itself and that a possible two-term Biden presidency would allow enough time for the alliance to be rebuilt and that there would be time for further European capabilities to be constructed but within the overarching framework of a reinvigorated transatlantic alliance. (DW, 2024)

4.5.1. How European Strategic Autonomy Changed under Trump I

The period following Trump's election in November 2016 was a watershed one. Trump assumed office in January of 2017, the same year that the implementation of the EU's Global Strategy was to start, with 'ambitious plans' (Damen, 2022) for EU security and defence, such as the European Defence Fund. Yet the academic community mostly 'continued to discuss EU-SA from a critical perspective, as a paper by several international experts published by the Clingendael Institute shows.' (idem). However, for all its ambition, the publication of the Global Strategy 'did little to help the concept of ESA gain traction in European capitals' (Franke & Varma, 2019).

The Trump I administration did not lose time in pushing forward its *America First* agenda, even to the detriment of its international agreements. On the 1st of June 2017, Trump announced the withdrawal of the United States of America from the Paris Agreement. In the spring of 2018, Trump imposed tariffs on steel and aluminium amounting to 25% and 10% respectively with a refusal to grant the EU permanent exemption. On the 8th of May 2018, Trump withdrew the US from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). These major decisions shook EU-US relations as it demonstrated an exceptional disengagement from its obligations and foreign relations with the EU a partnership which constitutes the largest economic relationship in the world at the time: US$1 trillion in bilateral trade (Harte, 2018b). This transactional and unilateral approach was a driver behind the expansion of strategic autonomy to beyond its initial conception. In 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron became the most vocal proponent of European strategic autonomy. In his ground-breaking Sorbonne speech, mentioned previous, he said: 'In the area of defence, our aim needs to be ensuring Europe's autonomous operating capabilities, in complement to NATO. The basis for this autonomy has been laid, with historic progress in recent months.' (Macron, 2017) referring to the launch of the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF) as the foundations of "Defence Europe." (Koenig, 2020)

The Trump administration, despite its insistence of Europe taking its defence into its own hands, 'torpedoed' these very foundations. His administration criticised PESCO and the EDF as duplicative of NATO (idem) and portrayed them as vehicles of protectionism, as Kay Bailey Hutchison, the U.S. ambassador to NATO at the time, warned, 'We're going to watch carefully, because if that becomes the case, then it could splinter the strong security alliance

that we have.' (CFR, 2018). In response, the US was accused of a "Buy American and sell anywhere" policy. (Koenig, 2020). In a letter to then EU High Representative Federica Mogherini in May 2019, the US government warned that restrictions on third country participation amounted to "poison pills" that could lead to retaliatory action. (idem)

The administration's attacks on the EU's defence initiatives were divisive. Warnings against duplication resonated with Central and Eastern Europeans wary of the French-inspired notion of strategic autonomy and eager to strike bilateral defence deals with the US (idem). The debate on third country participation in the EDF and PESCO also divided Europeans into two camps: one led by Northern and Eastern members with close defence industrial ties to the US or UK which advocated an open approach and another, led by France, in favour of a restrictive approach (idem). That is to say the Atlanticist-Europeanist cleavage. This was not without nuances within each camp, as former Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt opined week, 'has a completely distorted view of the history of European integration. So distorted that it's dangerous.' (CFR, 2018) Trump's assault was not only on the geopolitical connection between the US and the EU but also on the geoeconomic. In pursuing his *America First* agenda during his first presidency, the administration went beyond only erecting tariff barriers, Trump implemented plans which sought to upend the global financial and trade institutions built together with America's European partners and which the EU was heavily integrated with.

An example highlighted by the European Parliament was 'the continued US blockage of new appointments to the Appellate Body (AB) of the World Trade Organization (WTO), which threatens to paralyse the WTO's dispute settlement system.' (Harte, 2018b) Considering the EU's reliance on liberal economic and financial institutions to facilitate international trade and give a sense of order and regularity to global governance, this measure caused enough concern that when the Appellate Body broke down over the lack of quorum, the EU was instrumental in setting up a Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement (MPIA) in order to continue facilitating world trade and international arbitration.

The response of the European Commission reflected the understanding that Trump was seeking to either radically reconstruct global institutions towards (what he saw as) American interest or, as 'the normally highly diplomatic European Commissioner for Trade' at the time, Cecilia Malmström, reckoned that he was 'planning to take a wrecking ball to the system, and that it's time for the EU and its allies to draw up a "Plan B."' (POLITICO, 2018) In a closed-

door meeting with trade ministers in Sofia, Malmström ‘issued a stark warning that there was no "common solution" to America's block on the appointment of WTO judges’, because Trump's policy is not to take ‘the appellate court hostage, but to destroy it.’ (idem) While ministers were discussing ways ‘to convince the United States to lift the block on the judges, “Malmström was very, very pessimistic about the appellate body and said that Trump wants it to fail”,’ according to one official in the room. A second official confirmed Malmström's remarks. (idem) Other measures, highlighted by the European Parliament was the ‘imposition of anti-dumping and countervailing duties on imports of Spanish ripe olives’ in 2018, which could have ‘wider implications for the EU’s common agricultural policy,’ as well as, ‘the US threats to impose tariffs on imports of EU cars and car parts.’ (Harte, 2018b)

It is clear that the EU was facing an economic and commercial threat from what was once its closest partner. It is here that SA started taking on much wider dimensions. Trump going above and beyond mere trade disputes – seeking to dismantle international institutions – was a challenge that was far graver than Chinese trade practices or its growing military capabilities. For its part, the EU and Europe were beginning to seek and implement measures to circumvent Trump’s assaults. The MPIA, PESCO, the EDF all were clear responses which aligned with the goals of both the Atlanticists and the Europeanists.

For the Atlanticists, these measures were thought to be enough to placate Trump and demonstrate a willingness to take on board the new American administration’s forceful policies in order to keep the US engaged in their defence and economies. For the Europeanists, these policies were a belated opportunity to finally construct an autonomous defence and economic trajectory. The grand irony for the Atlanticists is that these measures were not only not enough but antagonistic to Trump’s (admittedly) contradictory messaging, further pushing the EU away from US engagement and towards a more developed sense of SA. The Atlanticists were confronted by a US government that wanted to suppress European interests and implement its own: an untenable prospective even for those nations that were heavily reliant or aligned historically with the United States, especially in the case of those nations bordering the Russian Federation which Trump I was seeking to re-engage.

4.6. Theoretical Analysis

How then can one make sense of these developments from a theoretical perspective?

Looking at Trumpism's volte-face regarding previous American policy towards Europe, an opportunity at adapting both a neorealist perspective and the theory of complex interdependency to describe this development presents itself.

The erosion of an international hierarchy and its decline should be considered as a systemic change. The decline of American hegemony, already progressing in the latter half of the 20th century reflects not a 'decline of power over others' but a 'decline of power over outcomes,' implying a democratisation of the international order. (Keohane & Nye, 1997)
This is to be viewed as inevitable as the global interdependency deepens across every facet of trade, politics, finance, commerce and society.

However, Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism would state that this decline in power over outcomes destabilises a hegemon's status. If the global international order built following the Second World War shored up America's hegemonic status, it is clear that this order and its financial, trade and political institutions that have since developed and become deeply ingrained have led to an erosion of America's hegemonic status. Following Mearsheimer's Fourth Assumption that survival is the primary goal of a great power, this decline may have disastrous consequences as the US risks becoming surpassed by rival powers. What good is military prowess if it cannot guarantee your hegemonic status?

One must also consider the opposite side of the US-EU relationship under Trump. It has been shown how the neorealist school can explain the EU's grand-strategic ambitions, it cannot explain the inefficacy of the Union implementing the policy measures necessary to take ESA from a thought experiment to firm policy initiatives.

Here the Complex Interdependency theory of Keohane and Nye offer an explanation.
The changes set in motion by Trump can be seen as the beginnings of a *regime change*. This is not a reference to the popular understanding of the phrase but as a change in the institutional relations, norms and rules between states: 'regimes are institutions in a broader sense: recognised patterns of practice that define the rules of the game.' (Keohane & Nye,

1997) Whilst the EU is not a state, it behaves on the international stage as a state-like entity. As a long-standing partner of the United States, the European Union and its constituent nations have developed various interdependencies in the realms of economics, trade, military affairs et al.

These relationships of interdependence 'often occur within, and may be affected by, networks of rules, norms, and procedures that regularise behaviour and control its effects.' (idem)
How and why these regimes dictated by norms change is due to the fact that 'in world politics rules and procedures are neither so complete nor so well enforced as in well-ordered domestic political systems, and the institutions are neither so powerful nor so autonomous.' (idem)
For the EU, which owes its existence to the post-war international liberal order, these norms are firmly entrenched in a way that is not the case in the domestic American context. Whereas the United States, through its domestic institutions like Congress and the Presidency, can diverge from these international regimes as there is no state above them that can enforce compliance. For the EU, which is a collection of sovereign states who are tightly enmeshed in the complex interdependency that created it, it is far more difficult to diverge from it without consequence (cf. Brexit). To do so would end the European project.

Since the structure of the system (the distribution of power resources among states) 'profoundly affects the nature of the regime (the more or less loose set of formal and informal norms, rules, and procedures relevant to the system),' there is an imbalance between actors within an international regime due to this, and 'the regime, in turn, affects and to some extent governs the political bargaining and daily decision-making that occurs within the system.' (idem)
This can be seen in the response collectively of the EU to Trump I. There was agreement in principle but divergences and an incapability to respond to a weakening of the international regime. Proposed measures either did not go far enough or did not progress at all.

This can be attributed to the fact that certain states and by extension the EU in a general sense was so interdependent with the US that to consider a rupture was unthinkable. Some thought that Trump was an aberration that could be waited out, and that whilst lip-service to SA was paid by the likes of Angela Merkel, very little initiative was taken to position the EU more independently from the US. Some noticed that for all of Trump's bombast, he did not take the most extreme measures he threatened to take (i.e. leaving NATO). An example of how

complex interdependence dictated the domestic and international policies taken by policy makers under Trump I.

There were tremors of a potential regime change, but nothing fundamentally destroyed it; the tariffs were shocking in respect to the transatlantic alliance, the WTO was dealt a blow but still continued to exist; the Paris Climate Agreement was significantly weakened but many states still party to it are not on track to keep their promises.

There was no critical juncture where the EU was forced to reckon with a more developed, independent grand strategy.
Trump I was a jolt that began the process of the EU beginning to coagulate SA into a more comprehensive idea that could be applied across a broad spectrum of policy sectors but was not the epistemological break that would push the EU into fully implementing strategic autonomy as a decisive policy and as a measure to maintain its position as a potential power in the international system.

5. Strategic Autonomy 2021-2024: COVID-19 Pandemic and Putin's Invasion of Ukraine

5.1 End of Trump I and the Beginning of the Pandemic

If Trump's first presidency prompted Europe to start discussing the possibility of SA as a security policy in the face of a possible American disengagement, the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic shook Europe awake to the necessity of a real grand strategy to endure and position itself on a more favourable footing as the worldwide crisis exacerbated pre-existing insecurities and new ones arose.

The concept of open strategic autonomy is 'strictly linked to the urgency that the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted.' (RMIS, 2021) The pandemic has revealed the 'relevance of external dependencies and vulnerabilities, and the consequent necessity for diversification of domestic and external sources of supply.' (idem) The economic fallout of Covid-19 quickly revealed the enormous scale of the globe's interconnectedness and the necessity of cooperation and trust:

'*Open strategic autonomy emphasises the EU's ability to make its own choices and shape the world around it through leadership and engagement, reflecting its strategic interests and values. (...) . It builds on the importance of openness, recalling the EU's commitment to open and fair trade with well-functioning, diversified and sustainable global value chains. It encompasses:*

- *resilience and competitiveness to strengthen the EU's economy;*
- *sustainability and fairness, reflecting the need for responsible and fair EU action;*
- *assertiveness and rules-based cooperation to showcase the EU's preference for international cooperation and dialogue, but also its readiness to combat unfair practices and use autonomous tools to pursue its interests where needed*.' (TPR, 2021)

The description of Open Strategic Autonomy reveals the rapid changes that were unfolding as a result of the pandemic. Whether the EU liked it or not, the previously held assumptions of the global order, were quickly unravelling as the basis for their existence evaporated.

Yet there were still early signs that the European Union was struggling to manage this disruption to its economy. The European Commission and the then European Commissioner for Trade, Phil Hogan, lamented protectionist responses to COVID-19 at Member State level (Jacobs et al, 2022). However, whilst Hogan insisted that 'an open trade policy will need to be part of any future economic recovery plan,' and that 'we need open and rules-based trade and to lead by example, urging our international partners to commit to the same.' (Hogan 2020)

However, in the same speech, the Commissioner alluded to developing resilience and a reorientation from the previous doctrine of free trade and open markets, using the concept of strategic autonomy:

In terms of drawing conclusions from the crisis, we need to think about how to ensure the EU's strategic autonomy. Strategic autonomy does not mean that we should aim for self-sufficiency. Given the complexity of supply chains, this would be an unattainable goal. We need an evidence-based discussion on what it means to be strategically autonomous. For example, we need to look at how to build resilient supply chains, based on diversification, acknowledging the simple fact that we will not be able to manufacture everything locally. We need to explore how to address strategic stockpiling. We need to factor in the European dimension, as it is patently clear that these goals can only be achieved if we act together. (Hogan, 2020)

In formulating a trade policy for the shocks of the pandemic and orienting itself for a post-covid world, stress was placed on maintaining course (European Commission, 2020). Any deviations from this during the pandemic and the implementation of authorisation measures that would install some measures of protectionism and resilience were articulated as 'targeted, proportionate, transparent and time-limited' measures, thereby stressing their exceptional nature and emphasizing that this is no model for long-term trade policy. (Hogan, 2020)

Hogan's insistence at this early stage of the pandemic still shows signs of an attempt by the European Commission to maintain the status quo that had given rise to the EU. However, given that the pandemic was not going anywhere soon and that the scale of the shock was becoming more apparent as time went on, the European Commission likely quickly realised that a purely defensive strategy was risky given how the COVID-19 crisis was disrupting public perceptions of globalisation. (Jacobs et al., 2022) In April 2020, as can be seen as early as Hogan's address, the Commission started to embrace two new concepts that might have been less threatening for its existing paradigm as they could more easily be moulded into pre-existing neoliberal discourse: 'resilience' and 'strategic autonomy.' (idem)

A newly-emerging debate within the Commission and the EU was developing over the newly inserted signifier 'strategic autonomy': [w]e need an evidence-based discussion on what it means to be "strategically autonomous." For example, we need to look at how to build resilient supply chains, based on diversification, acknowledging the simple fact that we will

not be able to manufacture everything locally (Hogan, 2020). A similar situation surrounded the concept of "resilience."

A major development ensued at the end of this year. The consultation announced by the Commission led to the publication of the Trade Policy Review (TPR) which was a major indicator that the EU was beginning to conceptualise SA as a necessary grand strategy that set it out as an independent actor on the international stage.

'The EU needs a new trade policy strategy – ***one that will support achieving its domestic and external policy objectives*** *[my emphasis] and promote greater sustainability in line with its commitment of fully implementing the UN Sustainable Development Goals… Making the right policy choices in designing a trade policy for the world of 2030 means taking into account recent political, economic technological, environmental and social shifts and the global trends emerging from them.' (TPR. 2021)*

The TPR was the first indication of the EU's acknowledgment of a world that was not going to return to business as usual. It soberly looked at the crises that had preceded it – the rise of China, the first Presidency of Donald Trump, the weakening of international institutions and the rules-based order – as well as the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and proposed a comprehensive assessment and action plan to respond to a world of growing, antagonistic competition. Although it should be noted that Trump was not mentioned once, and the United States was mentioned only one time regarding the importance of EU-US cooperation on new regulations, a 'peppering of direct and implied references to explicit that the EU will give a priority to strengthening its partnership with the United States,' no doubt as to alleviate the anxieties of the Atlanticists who were still adamant that the EU-US partnership could not be downplayed in any capacity given their security dependency on the US and/or their dependency on an export-oriented trade policy.

The other geostrategic elephant in the room, China, continued to play a role in debates over strategic autonomy as it had in the past. In 2020, China surpassed the United States to become the EU's leading trading partner in goods, as the result of an increase of imports (+5.6%) and exports (+2.2%) from China while at the same time trade with the United States recorded a significant drop in both imports (-13.2%) and exports (-8.2%). (Eurostat, 2021)

But as Europe's economic relationship with China deepened, so too did security concerns. Adding to these concerns, the rising tensions between the United States and China have left the EU to grapple with the "three-body problem." An eleventh-hour dash in 2020 to finalise (in principle) negotiations on the long-awaited EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) looked incompatible with efforts to redefine the transatlantic relationship with the incoming administration of Joe Biden. (Blockmans, 2021)

Whilst these negotiations went on, many in Europe rejected the notion that the EU should have to seek the approval of the United States before signing an agreement that advances European commercial interests with an inescapable China. (idem) Considering the importance of the Chinese market for Dutch semiconductor manufacturing and German automobile exports, this left these traditionally staunch Atlanticists stuck between a rock and a hard place. American interests are certainly not in favour of deepening economic ties with China, no matter the administration. Yet, for the Dutch, Germans and northern European nations, the United States is crucial to their national defence architecture, and until then, the Dutch and others have consistently sided with the Americans. (Haar, 2023) For Atlanticism, this contradiction is untenable.
The solution could be found in this expanded conception of *Open* Strategic Autonomy, which could address these two seemingly irreconcilable positions by balancing out security concerns with commercial ones.

'We have to enhance our open strategic autonomy, something France has been urging for a long time,' the then Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte said in 2022' (POLITCO, 2022) adding that if the Netherlands and other countries such as the Nordics are shifting position on the concept of Open Strategic Autonomy, Rutte replied: 'Yes, we are.' A decisive shift was clearly occurring. Rutte was also quick to stress, however, that the European economy should stay open. And his use of the phrase "open strategic autonomy" reveals that it is a phrase used by those who want a more balanced approach. (idem)

Indeed, much of the TPR was dedicated on strengthening EU trade partnerships beyond the US and China, indirectly recognising that a new status quo was developing wherein these nations were becoming competitors. Cooperation and partnerships would continue with the Chinese and Americans but with far lower interdependencies that had characterised the preceding decades.

The report was unequivocal and unapologetic in its support for multilateralism. This is evidently 'a reflection of the EU's particular DNA, but also an acknowledgement of the state of crisis threatening the rules-based international order.' (Blockmans, 2021) The TPR's defence of multilateralism demonstrated the EU's view of the collective necessity to shore up the bloc's position and interests vis-à-vis free trade to save it 'from the jaws of power-based relations, a demise which ultimately would be in the interests of nobody.' (idem) Thus, the European Commission was taking the initiative in outlining a clear commitment to the EU's open strategic autonomy in the realm where it is most powerful: trade and, to a lesser extent, investment policy. However, it must be noted that the EU's positioning of trade as a fundamental leverage on the world stage is just one noticeable aspect of the TPR; the language surrounding its advancement of OSA is revealing as to how the EU viewed the seemingly weakened international order at the end of Trump I and the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Its characterisation of Open Strategic Autonomy – which takes centre stage – reveals the way the EC was analysing the global reorganisation. '**Open strategic autonomy emphasises the EU's ability to make its own choices and shape the world around it through leadership and engagement, reflecting its strategic interests and values.** [EC's emphasis] It reflects the EU's fundamental belief that addressing today's challenges requires more rather than less global cooperation.' (TPR, 2021)

On the surface it appears that the EU is clearly advocating for a continuation of an open world and the rejection of unilateralism as mentioned above. Yet it is clearly responding to a situation that was in development and propulsed by forces outside of its control. Hence, the promotion of the 'ability to make its own choices' and 'reflecting its strategic interests and values.' The EU's use of this language, whilst keeping the door open to multilateralism with the US and China, is stating that it will not sacrifice its interests in the face of growing unilateralism and is willing to maintain its interests and a multilateral environment with others, as reflected in the focus on growing trade ties with Latin America, the Caribbean and Asia.

This is significant, as in the seeming absence of traditional American hegemonic leadership under Trump, the EU is implying that it is ready and willing to pick up the mantle by

leveraging the fact that it is the world's largest trading bloc. It knows that there are forces far beyond its control and that an appeal across the Atlantic over shared values, or the necessity of a level-playing field in trade, commerce and subsidies for shared Sino-European prosperity would undoubtedly fall on deaf ears. In order to prevent being left in the dust, or being exploited for its idealist defence of multilateralism, liberal free markets and a globalised world, the EU was putting itself forward as an equally independent player which would defend its interests not out of a sense of misplaced, positivist optimism, but from the cold, harsh realities that it was being presented with.

Whilst on the surface it might look that Open Strategic Autonomy was attempting to defend the post-war status quo, consciously or subconsciously it was setting itself apart from the international forces that were eroding the international regime and promoting the EU as an independent global actor which, whilst not disengaged from the world, was willing to assert itself as a separate power, couched in terms of trade, multilateralism, finance and investments, but also in ideals of liberal democratic values which were being jettisoned by the Trump administration and which are alien to the People's Republic of China. This is notably the role that America played in the 20th Century as a global hegemon to which the world's nations with similar ideals had band-wagoned on to; the implied discursive elements of the TPR also implies an EU that sees itself as fulfilling that now empty role – perhaps not as a hegemon – but certainly as an entity defending the previous ideals of the United States which others will inevitably gravitate towards and switch to a new bandwagon.

Thus, one can see how the concept of open strategic autonomy has now shifted beyond the need to develop Europe's own strategic base in industrial and military terms – as originally conceptualised – to encompass the freedom of choice, that is, to take a principled stance in pursuit of the EU's own values and interests. The Commission is telegraphing that it does not believe that Europe must choose between the United States and China but that it can carve out a third way, allowing the EU to cooperate with both rival powers, albeit on different footings and not at equidistance. (Blockmans, 2021)

However, given the still glaring deficiencies in policy implementation, the long-term nature of this shift in strategy, the economic chaos of covid-19, the still present camps of Europeanists and Atlanticists and the newly-elected American President Joe Biden's revival

of the transatlantic alliance with its apparent return to normality: what was to prevent backsliding away from Open Strategic Autonomy?

5.2. Putin, Ukraine and Russia.

One year after the end of Trump's first presidency, and two years after the covid-19 pandemic shut down the world economy, Europe, and the world faced a crisis that rivalled all that it had hitherto faced. On the 24th of February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine the so-called "Special Military Operation." War had once again arrived in the Old Continent.

The invasion of Ukraine was paradigm-shifting, as we shall discuss below. The war has reintroduced high-intensity land warfare and dismantled the illusion of perpetual peace. (Genini, 2025)

The European Union's (EU) Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), conceived at the end of history, in a moment of relative peace, 'has struggled' to adapt to the realities of a rapidly evolving wartime environment. Consequently, the war in Ukraine has forced the EU into 'uncharted territory in foreign, security, and defence policy.' (idem)

The war, coming off the back of the pandemic, solidified that a new geopolitical order was not just coming into being, but was present. Overnight, the continent became acutely aware of how 'habituated Europe had become to cheap Russian energy for its industries and households.' (Malone, 2025) Europe's vulnerability was laid bare as European states and their citizens, already bearing the brunt of a cost-of-living crisis following the pandemic, had to reckon with a consequent on the hike in prices for food and energy following Putin's attack on Ukraine.

At the same time, Northern Europe became the target of hybrid attacks (e.g. sabotage of critical infrastructure) as Russia tested NATO's defensive resolve. The Nordstream 2 pipeline was put on ice, then blown up. (BBC, 2022) Germany's (and Europe's) cheap supply of gas from the Russian Federation disappeared overnight, grain markets were in turmoil as Russia and Ukraine collectively produced between 108.2 million to 109.2 million tonnes of corn in

2021, representing 14% of global wheat production at the time, further driving up prices for European (and global) citizens. (Mottaleb, Kruseman et al., 2022)

Europe found itself coming to terms with the fact that it was perilously exposed on three fronts: perilously dependent on China for, inter alia, critical raw materials; on Russia for energy; America for security and defence as well as digital technologies. (Malone, 2025)

In such an unstable geopolitical environment, such dependencies make Europe 'uniquely vulnerable to economic coercion at best, and hybrid warfare at worst.' (idem)

5.2.1. Ukraine, CFSP and European rearmament

The EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) was formed in 1993 as the EU's joint foreign and security policy. Through several Treaty changes, such as the Amsterdam, Nice and Lisbon Treaties, the CFSP has evolved, and progressively, these amendments created the role of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and the European External Action Service (EEAS) (European Parliament, 2026).

The CFSP is unique in the sense that it is not, as one would expect from an international actor, the sole or supranational policy common to all members of the EU. The CFSP legal framework has been marked by a persistent tension since, on the one hand, 'there is the aspiration for a more robust Union' on the international stage, capable of presenting a unified voice; on the other hand, 'there is the inclination of Member States to retain control' over foreign affairs as an inherent aspect of national sovereignty. (Genini, 2025)

Thus, while Article 2(4) TFEU formally places the CFSP under EU competence, 'Member States have refused to cede control' of what is considered to be a sovereign issue to the EU on the same footing as, *inter alia*, monetary policy or trade. In this regard, the CFSP can be considered to be a weak point as its capacity to act on the world stage is inherently limited as Member States pursue their own foreign policy objectives, and often rapidly diverge in said objectives. (idem)

Speaking with one voice in CFSP has long been a core objective of the EU (Voncina, 2011), that is, to fulfil the vision of a united Europe has shaped European integration from the outset.

The failed 2003 European Constitution attempting to introduce a Union Minister for Foreign Affairs, further reinforcing this ambition to act on the world stage as one. (Official Journal C, 2003) The 2009 Lisbon Treaty Building further pushed towards Europe acting as one on the world stage, obliging Member States to support the CFSP 'in a spirit of loyalty and mutual solidarity', as outlined in Article 24(3) TEU. A unified CFSP would elevate the EU into a decisive and credible security actor, able to assert its interests and values globally. (Genini, 2025) As High Representative Kaja Kallas remarked, 'the EU's success as a foreign policy actor is entirely dependent on [its] capacity to speak with one voice.' (Kallas, 2024)

But as mentioned, the inability of the EU to fully move as one, despite these obligations, severely hampers its geopolitical ambitions. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Europe is torn between Atlanticists and Europeanists, the CFSP's (lack of strength) is directly tied to these internal divisions that manifest in individual Member States' policies.

5.2.2. The Strategic Compass and Ukraine

On 21 March 2022, not long after the invasion of Ukraine, the EU formally adopted the Strategic Compass (SC), being described as a 'turning point for the European Union as a security provider'. (Borrell, 2022)

The SC is envisaged as the EU's new political blueprint for a more responsive and prepared CFSP over the next decade having the crux of building a bridge between the CFSP, as imbued in Title V of the TEU, as a response to the geopolitical tsunamis of the erosion of multilateralism, the return of large-scale warfare to the European continent, and an uncertain security environment in the transatlantic. (Genini, 2025) However, it must be noted that the SC is not legally binding. In this vein, the SC functions as, by their own admission, a 'guide to action', rather than a simplistic EU vision of the world. (Borrell, 2022) Its significance is in the intended aim of introducing 'the language of power' (Borrell, 2019) and implementing the "Geopolitical Commission" manifesto of Ursula von der Leyen into reality. (Genini, 2025)

The SC also serves as an important signal of political unity and commitment to the CFSP. (Sus, 2021) The Compass was an initiative drafted by EU Member States, driven by Germany

and France. Moreover, the SC was reinforced by the first-ever EU Threat Analysis, indicating that there is an impulse to building a strategic defence culture at the EU level. (Genini, 2025) Whilst the Compass was years in the making – its *travaux preparatoires* dating back to June 2020 (Genini, 2025) – the outbreak of war in Ukraine undoubtedly served as a catalyst to taking a geostrategic view of security seriously as it was extensively rewritten following the invasion. Additionally, the simple fact that a large-scale land war was being raged on the EU's borders united the Member States with a unitary purpose, creating a sense of cohesion between them. This was outlined in the Compass itself, as the SC expressly states, 'the war on Ukraine is the most serious security crisis in Europe for decades' and 'a tectonic shift in European history.' (Strategic Compass, 2021) The SC therefore is the core of the EU's military answer to the return of war in Europe. (Genini, 2025)

The scale of the crisis of the Russo-Ukraine War pushed the EU, for first time, to acknowledge the erosion of the international liberal order as a consequence of the war in Ukraine (Genini, 2025). Whilst post-Trump I, some could hold on to the belief that all will be well and that Trump was merely an aberration, covid-19 will be solved and the world will get back to normal, the war in Ukraine dashed any potentiality for a business-as-usual mindset: Russia was willing to use significant military force to carve out a sphere of influence, informed by the fact that Russian gas was fuelling European economies; China centralised and heavy-handed response had led her to emerge stronger and more ambitions from the lockdowns whilst the rest of the world was reeling from second and third waves. There was a clear sense that there was no going back.

For the first time, the EU worked to advance the operational side of the CFSP, 'structuring a previously undefined agglomeration of actions into a coherent framework of practicable initiatives accompanied by concrete timelines.' The SC outlines 81 CSDP initiatives to be implemented by 2030, through which the EU should be able to 'shoulder a greater share of responsibility for its own security.' (idem)

Nevertheless, the Strategic Compass falls short in a key area: it fails to adequately address the EU's strategic autonomy, 'which is arguably its raison d'etre.' (Genini, 2025) For all of its innovation and energy towards fleshing out a real strategic and security position, it differs little from previous announcements, with little pronouncement on explaining in greater detail 'how the EU will protect its citizens, enhance its strategic sovereignty and become a stronger

global partner.' (McAllister, 2021) The term "strategic autonomy" is mentioned only once in the 64-page document. Furthermore, even if a unanimous assessment of common threats can be reached. this does not translate to providing the EU with the 'capacity for autonomous action, (Genini, 2025) backed up by credible military forces, the means to decide to use them, and a readiness to do so, in order to respond to international crises.' (Saint-Malo, 1998)

The fact of the matter is that whilst pushing along the EU's capacity to engage in security matters, it falls short from the requirements of strategic autonomy and the envisaged common defence initiatives of the Saint-Malo declaration which gave rise to the CFSP. The SC does not 'represent the expected "quantum leap" in CFSP,' but rather, it 'confirms the EU's limited capacity to operate effectively in this domain.' (Genini, 2025) Its goal is to increase the defence readiness of the bloc, yet the SC cannot be considered as the path to the EU's strategic autonomy or any greater integration into the CFSP since 'it fails to realistically and precisely define what kind of security actor the EU aspires to be.' (idem)

This was articulated by the then High Representative, Josep Borrell's views that the future of European military defence and security is to be decentralised, despite Russia's military and manpower vastly dwarfing the current collective capacity of European militaries:

'We do not want to create a European army. It is not about creating a European army. The European armies will remain, each Member States having its own military army. But we have to work together closer. We have to coordinate better our expenditure.' (Borrell, 2022)

In response to the largest war to occur on the continent since 1945, the EU's response for its long-term security is decisively lacklustre; it has been able to fund and equip the Ukrainian military and has been instrumental in keeping the country in the fight, but it has reveal glaring deficiencies in military procurement, funding and integration. The SC is hampered by its 'constructive ambiguity' (Santopinto, 2022) regarding its main objectives ultimately rendering it obsolete.

5.2.3. Strategic Autonomy and Energy

As mentioned in the previous subchapter, the Russian invasion of Ukraine led to a rapid breakdown in economic ties, culminating in five waves of sanction measures. (Marusyk,

2025) A few months after the initial invasion, in May 2022 the EU Member States came to an agreement for a plan to eliminate Russian energy imports by 2027 entitled REPowerEU, this plan relied on three main pillars: diversification of supply, energy saving, and expansion of renewable (domestic) production. (idem) This promoted a higher level of debate over security and sustainability in Europe owing to the deep dependency in energy certain nations had on Russia (Osička & Černoch, 2022). Built upon the European Green Deal and Fit-for 55 plan, REPowerEU relies heavily on renewables, electric transition, and eventually green hydrogen as key drivers of domesticating energy production. (European Commission, 2022) The focus on renewable energy offers a unique security advantage:

- It cannot be embargoed.
- It cannot be blocked at a shipping chokepoint.
- It is not priced on a volatile global commodity market.
- It provides long-term price stability because there is no fuel cost.

Domestically produced electricity from renewable and other zero-emissions energy sources are already more secure and economically stable in a way globally traded fuels are not. (Novogradac, 2026) A greater share of renewables as part of Europe's electricity supply nullifies the dependence the bloc has on Russia. Energy, therefore, has since become a focal point of EU policy debates. Its reliance on energy imports, which accounted for nearly 60% of its consumption, has underscored the obstacles to achieving true strategic autonomy. (Marusyk, 2025) Once again referring to the tension between the Atlanticist and Europeanist debate, Germany's overwhelming dependence on energy imports had further complicated the debate of strategic autonomy and any substantial moves has necessarily prevented firmer action being taken, and considering the country's prominence in the Atlanticist camp, it paradoxically has delayed the formation of a more comprehensive and strategic look at its international entanglements. On the one hand, Germany (and others) were firmly dependent on and unwilling to disengage with the American security whilst, paradoxically, she and others in Eastern Europe had left their other flank vulnerable to Russia via this energy dependency. The war in Ukraine therefore not only discredited the previous policy of continued engagement with Russia and the firm commitment to the American-led security apparatus, but even the "balanced" approach of *Open* Strategic Autonomy was clearly no longer enough. The world that was still open was rapidly shrinking, and the idea of continued

reliance and multilateralism was becoming impossible as it had led to an extremely vulnerable strategic position at a delicate moment.

The energy crisis which was initiated by the covid-19 pandemic in 2021 had been exacerbated by the Russia-Ukraine war revealing the clear vulnerabilities of the EU's energy supply and the need for a diversified and resilient energy strategy. (Damen, 2023) Due to the energy crisis from the war, the EU's energy policy objectives started to be re-evaluated, and there was a calling into question the feasibility of achieving strategic energy autonomy while balancing these key objectives: 'the functioning of the energy market, security of supply, energy efficiency and savings, combined with development of renewables and energy network interconnection.' (Marusyk, 2025) The EU thus had to find a way to overcome the challenges of pursuing both its strategic autonomy and advance the green energy transition, amidst the backdrop of its reliance on imported raw materials crucial for renewable energy production. (Damen, 2023) While the EU has managed the immediate impacts of the energy crisis through diversification of supply, the experience of a mild winter in 2023, and stockpiling gas storage, the long-term strategic vision for energy autonomy remains a complex and multifaceted issue. (idem)

The narrative of strategic autonomy therefore achieved new impetus as it was no longer an abstraction but a tangible social, political and economic matter that had exited the ethereal domain of academic discourse and political white papers, to something that directly touches on citizen's livelihoods. The response of the European Union – hitting Russia's purse – had an immediate impact on energy costs, driving up costs for European households further after the covid-19 price rise; the sanctions package caused tensions in industry as production was now more expensive which slowed down European economies and, as a consequence, would further impact the livelihoods of Europeans.

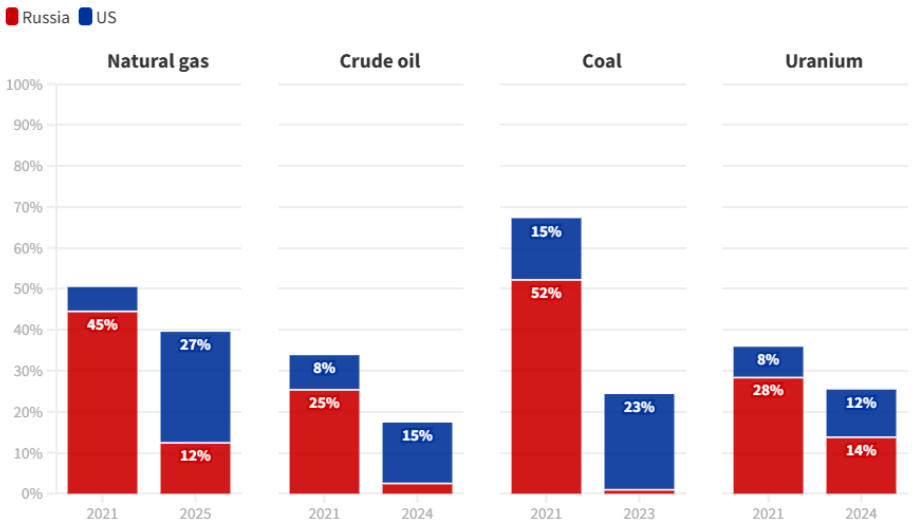
In order to prevent an economic catastrophe due to Europe's main source of energy being cut off overnight, US LNG quickly replaced Russian energy. Whilst the European Commission quickly implemented long-term measures as part of its plan to divest from Russian energy imports by 2027, framing the measures as a policy of 'diversification' as part of its push towards seriously implementing an open, strategic autonomy, there is a glaring contradiction in jettisoning one dependency and deepening another. (Damen, 2023) (European Commission, 2022)

One could argue that this is a temporary measure until imports can be diversified and renewable energy (which is part of Europe's strategic policy on energy and the climate) is expansive enough to replace the need of fossil fuels. A further argument (one no doubt that the Atlanticists at the time emphasised) is that Biden's presidency is a more stable partner and is less of a strategic vulnerability than under a Trump presidency. But this still has severe strategic implications, Europe resorting to these measures in a time of conflict underline its inability to react to international events, even at its own doorstep. When faced with the threat of an aggressive Russia that has unleashed the first large-scale land war on the continent since 1945, Europe has lurched from one dependency to another?

As highlighted, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the EU has sharply increased energy imports from the United States. Imports of natural gas – particularly liquefied natural gas – crude oil, coal and uranium amounted to €70 billion in 2024. (Keliauskaitė et al., 2026) Prior to the war, Russia supplied two-fifths of the EU's gas. (idem) US LNG has since replaced Russian pipeline gas and an increasing number of supplies now coming from Africa and the Middle East. US LNG now accounts for one-quarter of the EU's gas supply, making the US the EU's second-largest supplier after Norway: a significant amount but certainly not to the same extent as Russia. (idem) There is more than meets the eye when it comes to the energy relationship between the EU and the US, post-2022.

Firstly, the EU's relative reliance on US supply is 'smaller than its reliance on Russia in 2021' (Keliauskaitė et al., 2026) (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: The share of US and Russian fuel in total EU fuel imports, 2021 vs the most recent year available.



Source: Bruegel based on Eurostat.

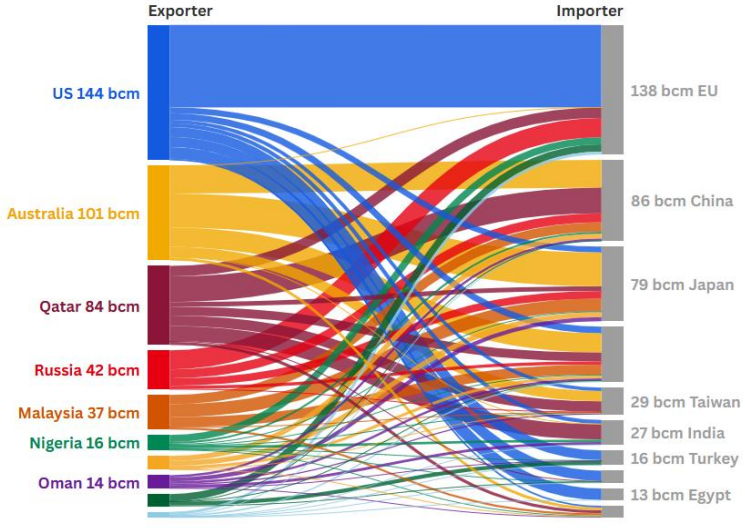
Secondly, the US cannot restrict energy exports to the EU for political reasons as the United States' institutions do not (usually) determine where private energy companies sell their products. (Keliauskaitė et al., 2026) Measures like this are usually taken during times of war or conflict to enforce economic sanctions, a US administration that took this course of action would essentially be declaring the EU as a hostile entity. This differs when it comes to the Kremlin which directly controls exports and is therefore a more direct threat as they can leverage this dependency, a US administration by contrast would be extremely limited in pursuing this course of action and is, consequently, less of a strategic threat.

Thirdly, EU energy imports from the US are transported by ships which in comparison to historic Russian pipeline imports, have an additional level of security since LNG suppliers can be switched relatively easily, whereas new supplies of gas via pipelines require new infrastructure to be built. (Keliauskaitė et al., 2026) For instance, Russian gas was supplied to Europe via four pipelines, which once stopped created an energy crisis owing to the difficulty in in replacing this route of supply to (especially) Eastern and Central Europe. In response to this, a rapid expansion of LNG terminals has changed this, increasing import capacity to 270 billion cubic metres (or 80 percent of gas demand), allowing buyers to access a wider range of exporters and shift between suppliers more easily than under the previous pipeline system. (idem) This rapid shift mirrors the rapid shift of Europe's adoption of open strategic autonomy. The shift to importing US LNG as part of its Russian divestment strategy allows its energy policy to remain somewhat insulated from Russian attempts at geopolitical leverage. The United States even should Trump return would be unable to leverage LNG in the same way that Russia theoretically could.

In addition, the EU and the US now account for the largest bilateral LNG trade flows (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Global LNG flows, 2025.

Top 10 exporters and importers.



Source: Bruegel based on Bloomberg.

Chinese tariffs mean the US cannot export LNG to China, (Reuters, 2026) limiting ability for a potential diversion. Theoretically, some US cargoes could be rerouted to Asian buyers such as Japan or South Korea, but rerouting US cargoes in this way would lengthen shipping routes, raise transport costs and 'require complex contractual arrangements.' Without the European market, the US 'would likely have to reduce exports, which would spike global prices.' (Keliauskaitė et al., 2026) This in turn means that EU gas security is based on the global LNG market. Should global gas demand rise, or supplies be otherwise disrupted, it will result in higher prices and stronger competition for cargoes, but not a physical gas cut-off. (idem) In this way, the EU is able to simultaneously balance conflicting Europeanist and Atlanticist policies; it will be able to, crucially, respond in the short and medium term to the fuel crisis; it allowed Europe to prepare for long-term energy security by diversifying its suppliers; it gives time for Europe and, indeed, accelerates the implementation of OSA in a crucial aspect of its domestic, foreign and economic policy.
In this response, the EU is demonstrating a decidedly realist behaviour in its development of an independent, strategic policy. European strategic decisions regarding energy and defence can be seen in the offensive realist terms of balancing and buck-passing which are 'the main strategies that states employ when faced with a rival that threatens to upset the balance of power.' (Mearsheimer, 2001)

Whilst previously, following the end of the Cold War, European states, especially Germany, had a policy of what offensive realists term "buck-passing" in which the burden of military defence is passed along, so to speak. Buck-passing is an attractive strategic policy because it usually provides a cheaper alternative to a burdensome self-investment in one's own military. (Mearsheimer, 2001) Why spent billions on a military in a unipolar world when the world's premier military power has your back? In the context of the transatlantic alliance, it is the US that became the "buck-catcher," making up the vast majority of NATO military expenditure and underwriting European defence. But with the outbreak of the war, this policy had clearly become a major weakness in European security as there was no certainty early on as to how the war would progress. Should Ukraine capitulate, it would demonstrate a profound danger for Europe as their defence would be dependent on the US, which was an ocean away and has been pivoting to the Pacific for a decade already, or as Mearsheimer puts it 'the difficulty of projecting power across large bodies of water makes it impossible for any great power to conquer and dominate' regions separated from it by oceans.'

From a realist perspective this is unacceptable for a (potential) great power as it would cede hegemony in their sphere to Russia. Great powers concentrate on first and foremost 'seek regional hegemony.' But it is not enough that a great power achieve hegemony in their own region, 'they also strive to prevent rivals in other areas from gaining hegemony.' A peer competitor like Russia is jeopardising the EU's position in the continent 'by upsetting the balance of power in their backyard.' (Mearsheimer, 2001)

Buck-passing has in this context has failed, and so another strategic posture is needed. One can therefore look at how the EU and its constituent states, have moved from buck-passing to balancing. This indicates that a more proactive approach is taking shape within the EU: a great power mentality is developing at the highest level of Europe. Balancing is a great power taking 'direct responsibility' for preventing an aggressor from upsetting the balance of power. (idem) There are three avenues powers can take regarding balancing actions. The first is through diplomacy that the aggressor's actions are dangerous and that the power is willing to engage in military action to defend the balance of power. The second is states that are threatened go on to create defensive alliances to deter the aggressor, often called "external balancing."

The first two were not enough to deter Russian aggression. The diplomatic approach after Russia occupied Crimea and the Donbass following the Maidan Revolution was impotent, the continuing importation of Russian gas undermined any diplomatic measures or economic sanctions for this aggression. Nor did the explicit role of NATO as a defensive alliance deter Russia, as the Kremlin knew full well that so long as a NATO member is not attacked, the alliance's only role would be supplying Ukraine and direct military involvement, and war, is kept at bay. This element is crucial, as from the Russian perspective this has the benefit of weakening NATO by expending its military assets; since America is the largest producer, has the largest military, and spends the most in the alliance, Europe will quickly expend its military assets and it will fundamentally weaken one half of the transatlantic military alliance and placing more of a burden on the United States.

Third, and for the purposes of this analysis, the most important measure of balancing available, is that threatened states can balance against an aggressor by mobilising additional resources of their own. (Mearsheimer, 2001). The most salient within this third option is expansion of a state or states' military forces, referred to as "internal balancing." The CPRF

and the commitment European states have implemented to boost military investments, and rearmament is a reflection of this internal balancing.

Germany, the most vocal – and to some, the most intransigent – Atlanticist state in the EU has apparently seen the writing on the wall and has implemented a comprehensive strategic volte-face as exemplified in then Chancellor Olaf Scholz's famous *Zeitenwende* speech. The commitment Germany made to arming Ukraine and cutting off ties with Russia, gave impetus to changes already in motion at the Union level, as with the massive support Germany was now giving to Ukraine, it was clear that the previously dovish defence policy of the country would have to change. More investments would be needed to rebuilt the German military and industrial capacity to supply Ukraine and an expanded Bundeswehr; this would eventually culminate in Germany removing its infamous debt brake on defence spending, cybersecurity and civil protection, freeing up (theoretically) a large amount of money and resources towards this endeavour, corresponding to the observation that 'when faced with a particularly aggressive adversary, great powers will eliminate any slack in the system and search for clever ways to boost defence spending.' (idem)

In addition to the impulse to maintain regional hegemony, a great power aims to maximise the 'amount of the world's wealth that they control.' (Mearsheimer, 2001) Wealth very easily can translate into military power. This aligns with the European Commission's framing of OSA as giving itself the strategic space to manoeuvre in an increasingly unilateral international system whilst also maintaining the very thing that makes it a force in the international system: trade. The European Union is the world's largest market, and a key component of the global economy. European firms, companies and multinationals are vital in research and technology. Its comprehensive legal and regulatory authority allows it to have an outsized influence on international trade via the *Brussels effect*.

The reorientation of European policy to OSA to reduce dependencies and enhance its own security and, crucially, maintain its commercial influence by enhancing existing trade ties, as well as seeking new ones, was not only a response to Trump I but equally a response to the upheaval of COVID-19. It was also clear that whilst the Biden administration was not as antagonistic as Trump I, the previous transatlantic partnership had not returned to its pre-2016 status. The Biden administration's Inflation Reduction Act caused immediate concerns in Europe, particularly over its subsidies to the American electrical vehicle (EVs) industry (as

a counter to Chinese dominance) and its control over the supply of raw materials necessary for EV batteries. The adoption of this piece of legislation directly harmed Europe's ambitions to achieve its goals of being a leading producer of renewable energy, weaning itself from fossil fuels, and becoming a world leader in EV production.

When coupled with the spat over the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) with China, which was announced to be adopted by the European Council after seven years of negotiations, it reveals that cracks that formed under Trump I were not completely repaired. The Biden administration's desire for 'early consultations' (Sullivan, 2020) about the agreement was seen as an overstep on European autonomy and foreign policy. Brussels responded that Trump's Phase One deal which Biden vowed to maintain was not consulted with the EU and so criticism of the CAI would be hypocritical. The fact that this came from an administration that was seen to be somewhat of a reset from Trump also underscored that there were increasing divergences between America and Europe despite the domestic political situation being more favourable to the transatlantic relationship.

Whilst it could be said that Trump I was a shock to the system, it is clear that the five years starting with the covid-19 pandemic until the end of Biden's presidency advanced the idea that strategic autonomy was necessary for Europe's future. The policy decisions taken by the EC and the consensus that built up amongst European nations, above all following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, demonstrate that it was the period from 2020-2025 that was the real fuel that caused Europe to seriously drive towards strategic autonomy.

The issues of China, America, access to raw materials had taken a backseat in the EU's focus. Whilst the Inflation Reduction Act and the recognition that China had a near 'monopolistic control' on the global market of the minerals necessary for the EU's Green New Deal, it is coloured by the events of the pandemic which disrupted the global economy and world trade, as well as the conflagration occurring a few hundred kilometres away from the EU's borders.

6. Conclusion

From its inception, strategic autonomy has grown and developed substantially since 2013.
Its first conception was one that was firmly entrenched in the Atlanticists worldview, as a partner of the United States and a lynchpin in the rules-based international order. However, strategic autonomy had started to coagulate into its more recognisable, modern form starting from the first presidency of Donald Trump.

There were limitations to its development in this period owing to the tensions between the Europeanists and Atlanticists within Europe and their competing visions for Europe. A balanced approach, "Open" Strategic Autonomy, was developed. The EU took the position that it would pick up more of the burden for its own security and would continue to defend multilateralism after Trump's abandonment of the liberal values that had given rise to the European Union.

But in this continued adherence to liberal multilateralism – its refusal to capitulate to MAGA – the EU sought to balance its engagement with America, China, and the rest of the world. It would not disengage nor decouple, but rather, it would derisk its international ties while remaining open to the world. Thence, the "open" in Open Strategic Autonomy.

It was only following the end of the first Trump Presidency and the beginning of Ursula von der Leyen's tenure that strategic autonomy began to be a much more coherent and fully-formed strategy with impetus towards further reforms and strengthening.
It was owing to COVID-19's undermining of Europe's access to raw materials and growing insecurity of its supply chains vital to its industrial and energy policy/security. At the same time, Putin's invasion of Ukraine brought home the necessity of a quick and unified effort to take charge of its own security.

The effects it had on Europe's strategic concerns, especially on defence and energy, galvanised the EU and its Member States to start aligning on these security concerns and lay the groundwork for further independence in military matters, supply chains and finance.
The period from 2020-2025 is, therefore, the crucial moment, and the influence of America and China in this period, whilst major factors, was not the inciting incident.

The development of Open Strategic Autonomy over this period is also demonstrative on alignment of the EU's policy developments with the neorealist school's interpretation of the international system.

Various strategies, policies and initiatives taken by the EU have been implemented with the goal of addressing the issues that neorealists contend are at the heart of every decision made by a state (or in the case of the European Union, a state-like entity) existing in an anarchic international system.

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