

IPR x Sundial Cooperation
Author: Constantin Mosch
Editor: Marie Lousie

Piecing Europe Back Together: What should the focus of the European Union be?



Figure 1. AI-generated image created using Image Generator by ChatGpt

Following the years of the Cold War and economic recovery, the European project followed a purpose: cooperation, and economic growth among its members. Over time, a European idea was created, and for most people, it became visible through the Schengen area. A continent united by the concept of cooperation. Cooperation which internally provides stability against global uncertainties in times of shifts towards a more multipolar world. What was created over the years was done by politicians and societies who experienced the trauma of the war and had a vision of a more peaceful world, a shared concept.

The shared concept of what the European Union should be is getting lost. Member states call upon Brussels to solve their issues but are unwilling to give Brussels the power. Especially in this changing world, the European Union has the potential to make itself and its members more independent and resilient. Where the EU was a tool to develop the continent economically while creating stability, it has reached the institutional importance that it cannot hide from seeking strategic responsibility for its member states. Key decisions can only be made through EU channels, especially facing international dynamics, for example, in the energy market and the dependencies on fossil fuels or facing security threats like terrorism or changing military alliances, require an institution like the EU to be visible on the international stage and towards its citizens.

Requests to become more visible have been made by changing politicians or news outlets in a recurring manner. What has changed is the timely matter of this project. Multiple questions about Europe's strategic place in the world have been present over the past years. Challenges have tested multilateral relations, but the demand of emerging powers for global acknowledgement, the war on the European continent and an incoming US administration that sees little priority in good transatlantic relations make a clear vision for the European Union more critical than ever.

Current Strategic Independence

Over the past few years, Europe has proved its ability to stand up amidst crises. Even though the financial crisis of 2008 concerned Eurozone members, it demonstrated European capabilities. Providing a fiscal stimulus with a total of €200 billion (€170 billion in national budget and €30 billion from the European Investment Bank) within the [European Recovery Plan](#) or loosening regulations to allow governments to bail out banks and help struggling companies are immediate responses but examples of shared resources that can and would not have been available in other circumstances. Furthermore, reforming economic governance and monetary policies has restored the trust in European economies, such as with several [stability mechanisms](#). More present, on the other hand, is the reaction to Covid-19 by organizing vaccines for all members but also providing economic stimuli through typical debt (€750 billion in Next Generation EU) and easing fiscal policies for its member states.

Another example that demonstrates the strategic strengths of the EU is the Green Deal brought forward in 2019 by Ursula von der Leyen. With this initiative, Europe's efforts to combat climate change were harmonized, demonstrating an answer to competitive disadvantages in the global market. While the European bureaucratic structure is complicated and finding a compromise among members takes time and diplomatic work, each law passed in the EU demonstrates its strategic independence. Whenever the EU is united in its efforts, it either provides funds to its members or offers a mutual benefit for all member states. So things can get done without controversy, and it serves the Union as a whole. But also whenever there is a driver behind the efforts, like when the "[Franco-German-Engine](#)" is pushing ideas. On the other hand, a [divide between interests](#) holds up efforts. While the principle of unanimity may be satisfactory, it certainly hinders efficient decision-making.

Attempts to "Declare Independence and Autonomy"

With the Declaration of Granada, the European Commission settled new focuses for the next few years. It attempted to create momentum for Europe's strategic independence and ways to achieve it. As an answer to Euros-skepticism that emerged before, during, and after Brexit, an answer was needed to mitigate what was seen as a contagious sentiment against the EU, eventually leading to more countries exiting the EU. When criticizing the push forward made in this paper, we can investigate what has since happened—likely negligible or insufficient efforts. Granada serves as a blueprint for what ought to be done to secure Europe's strategic independence.

With the second Trump administration taking office, worries about the stability of transatlantic relations have risen, and serious calls for more autonomy have been raised. A glimpse of a Trump presidency still causes fear across European capitals. The reality Europe must face is that, firstly, its dependence on the USA remains true. Threats to withdraw European protection cause insecurity and undermine its credibility as a reliable partner. Europe has based its common security across several treaties and has anchored the support for attacked member states in the Treaty on European Union (Art. 42.7 TEU). On the international scale, European security efforts are hidden behind NATO efforts and have focused on the EU Mission for crisis management and peacekeeping (e.g., Mali and the Horn of Africa) which

were installed to support European interests like [protecting trade routes](#). They were not there to be visible in a broader strategic framework but to serve their own interests. In case of an attack on EU soil, American military resources are required to counter these attacks.

Transatlantic Relations are essential, but not everything

While having a strong partner across the Atlantic is desirable, the EU should focus its efforts on cooperation with states that serve its interests and make itself more independent. In a world with shifting state relations, being a reliable partner is important, but seeking strategic ties beyond existing ties may be beneficial. If we are able to agree that we are shifting from a bipolar to a multipolar world, each pole will have to search for its place in this newly arranged context.

In a world of competition between state systems and political systems, an alliance of democratic states that prides itself on its values must convince other states of the benefits maintaining relations with them will have. Working towards more independence from the US may seem undesirable for the EU as it is a [cornerstone of its security concept](#). But by managing a mindset shift of the EU and its members, that it can be independent of a third state and can implement policies which serve its interests with other states, then member states will receive more confidence in the transatlantic relations and could eventually turn these relations into a more efficient collaboration.



Figure 2. Illustration by Peter Schrank, published in [The Economist](#)

Another Report and another debate

Mario Draghi raised important topics in his recent [report](#). He opens the discussion of the role of the EU to provide autonomy to its members. Autonomy can be understood to promote EU values and interests. Draghi is more concerned about the actual implementation to protect these elements by protecting security and economic interests. In his reports, he lays out important areas the EU and its members should focus on promptly. The report highlights shortcomings compared to other competing states.

In his report, he is loud and clear about what the EU needs in his eyes, so it is no wonder that some responses were critical. However, taking this report as a warning and a reminder to be concerned with itself and look for its place in the world, where competition has increased, should be a priority for the EU. Otherwise, it loses its purpose. Promoting its values and interests is one thing, but standing up for them is another step. While the EU must find consensus among its members to move forward, it should receive more power to do so. One step in this is to create a common budget with shared debt-taking. Such a budget would work on the diverse aspects of European responsibilities.



Figure 3. Mario Draghi delivers his report on the future of European Competitiveness © European Commission, 2024. Source: [European Commission](#).

Strengthening the EU

The EU's role must extend beyond its appearance on the international stage, where it represents its 27 members, and also restore its trust in itself as an institution to its own 450 million citizens. Leaving the 2024 elections and having established new commissioners aside, many EU citizens criticize their marginal influence on the people representing their interests and shape policies that consequently affect them. While the EU tries to listen to the people through a diverse range of initiatives, the effect of engagement of its citizens may be limited. Especially considering the perceived inclusion of its population. Bearing this in mind, we are faced with the question of what the European Union means to us. At the same time European institutions must answer what they want to deliver to their member states and, subsequently, to its citizens.

European enlargement has proceeded to an extent that a return to more national autonomy is not of benefit to everyone. Getting Brexit done was a popular idea for parts of the United Kingdom's political landscape; today, it is a sensitive topic, not only because of the political agenda behind it and campaign methods used to distort the narrative but also due to the consequences on the British economy. This is an example of what isolating from multilateral

relations means from a European perspective. Consequences not only due to the harsh economic downturn but also to the reaction of the EU during the negotiations to not give too many benefits. Today, the UK has to negotiate bilateral agreements without the backing of the EU, where its interests may not seem as pressing as those of bigger states. But more importantly, it lost its say in regulations concerning one of its most important export markets.

On the other hand, we can see the [Swiss](#) case, where the EU was finally fed up with special conditions and is now negotiating to deepen bilateral relations. These two cases demonstrate the strength of the Union. Representing the interests of the second largest economic area. And it is this interest that is the base of the EU from which it expands.

Steering the uncertainties

Looking at today's challenges for the European Union, we could start looking into different future topics, such as the deepening and widening of the Union – an internal question, strategic independence – an external question, security independence, or economic independence. Answering each question individually is important but cannot be answered separately; they all relate to what the EU wants to be. Currently, the EU and its politicians tend to serve more as a purpose to themselves and not the interests of the general good of all member states. There is a dilemma where national interests are gradually overshadowing the EU's ability to foster cooperation both internally and externally. The EU will only become more independent when it recognizes that merely reacting to a changing environment is insufficient; it must actively shape the changes it faces.

We have seen this process happening through different initiatives addressing global questions, in which the European Union was united. Covid is an excellent example of this; inspirations from this should be taken and implemented in the different aspects of EU interests. Member states should be aware that this means giving up parts of their sovereignty; the return on this investment would be more stable foreign relations and a resilient economy against global shocks.