

Strengthening Europe: How Strategic Autonomy Requires a Shift in Sovereignty

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Published 27th January 2025

Abstract

This paper explores the tension between national sovereignty and the EU's quest for strategic autonomy in the context of a multipolar world. Rooted in its post-World War II integration, the EU has developed mechanisms to preserve member states' sovereignty while fostering collective action. However, areas such as defence, foreign policy, and economic resilience reveal the challenges of balancing these goals. The re-election of Donald Trump in 2024 highlights the urgency of reducing reliance on external powers, particularly the United States, for security. The paper examines key domains of strategic autonomy, including defence, technological independence, and economic resilience, while highlighting how national divergences hinder progress. The case of Brexit serves as a cautionary example of the risks of prioritising sovereignty over integration. Ultimately, the EU's global influence remains constrained by internal divisions, dependence on external partners, and limitations in decision-making frameworks. The paper argues that achieving a cohesive and strategically autonomous EU is essential for addressing global challenges and enhancing the bloc's resilience and influence.

Keywords: strategic autonomy, sovereignty, balance of power

I. Introduction

From the ashes of World War II to a series of treaties, economic alliances, and political concessions, the European Union's (EU) agenda has always been centred on striking a balance between national sovereignty and strategic autonomy.¹

The conflict between these two ideals has only got worse as the EU grapples with the challenges of a multipolar world. In areas like military, foreign policy, and taxation, Member States still have a great deal of power, but the EU's strategic autonomy goal keeps pushing for greater cooperation and integration.

The fact that Donald Trump was re-elected as President of the United States in November 2024 emphasises the urgency and gravity of the situation. The subject of Europe's security and defence dependence on the United States has been raised time and again in recent years,

¹ Maxime Lefebvre, issue brief, *Europe as a Power, European Sovereignty and Strategic Autonomy: A Debate That Is Moving towards an Assertive Europe*, February 2, 2021, <https://old.robert-schuman.eu/en/doc/questions-d-europe/qe-582-en.pdf>.

especially during Trump's first term, when his administration publicly questioned the worth of the U.S. - EU alliances.² Trump's reelection might cause the United States once more to shift its policies in an isolationist direction, endangering the EU's security ties and highlighting the necessity for the EU to reevaluate its reliance on the United States. Therefore, the EU's quest for strategic autonomy becomes of greater significance.

In light of this context, this paper will examine the EU's national sovereignty procedures, its ambitions for strategic autonomy, and the underlying tensions between these two goals. It will make the case that, although national sovereignty offers member states vital protections, it also restricts the EU's ability to function as a cohesive global force by looking at important sectors including defence, foreign policy, economic resilience, and technical independence. Trump's reelection is a powerful reminder that the security and resilience of its member nations depend more than ever on a robust and independent EU. This paper will conclude by discussing how a more strategically independent EU could enable Europe to effectively and unitedly face global challenges in spite of national reluctance.

II. The Role of National Sovereignty in the EU

² Jeremy Diamond, "Trump Opens NATO Summit with Blistering Criticism of Germany, Labels Allies 'Delinquent,'" CNN, July 11, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/07/10/politics/donald-trump-nato-summit-2018/index.html>.

The EU, as we know it today, was created through a series of treaties. The concept appeared after the Second World War, when there was a more emphasised desire for economic cooperation and peace.³ This led to the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951, formed by only 6 member states: Belgium, France, West Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. It was officially renamed the European Union in 1992 with the Maastricht Treaty, which was intended for the creation of a European Monetary Union. The EU succeeded the European Economic Community, which was founded in 1957 with the Treaty Of Rome. The Treaty of Lisbon of 2007, however, established the functioning of the EU today, by implementing certain important structural changes, such as giving more power to the European Parliament and changing voting procedures in the Council, as well as clarifying which powers or competencies belong to the Member States, which belong to the EU, and which are shared. Thus, it is from the Treaty of Lisbon that we can estimate the balance between national sovereignty and supranationalism that exists in the EU nowadays.⁴ These treaties incrementally advanced integration within the EU while still including specific measures to protect national sovereignty. The Treaty on the European Union (Maastricht), for example, established

³ "History of the European Union – 1945-59," European Union, 2024,

https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/history-eu/1945-59_en.

⁴ Finn Laursen, "The Founding Treaties of the European Union and Their Reform," Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics, August 31, 2016, <https://oxfordre.com/politics/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-151>.

the EU, but retained strict limits on areas like defence and foreign policy, where national governments remained largely in control.

There are several key mechanisms in the EU that preserve sovereignty for the Member States. The first is the Principle of Subsidiarity, which states that decisions remain at the national level within member states unless EU intervention is deemed necessary. This also means that Member States retain control over areas not explicitly delegated to the EU, such as education and social security.

Another mechanism that exists in the EU framework that protects national sovereignty is treaty exception or legal opt-out. In general, European Union law is applicable across all twenty-seven EU Member States. However, there are cases where individual Member States negotiate specific opt-outs from certain EU legislation or treaties (e.g. Schengen or the Euro). This mechanism, however, is a lot more controversial than the others, as many feel states should be fully committed to the treaties of the EU. Nevertheless, it is another mechanism that protects national sovereignty.

Additionally, unanimity is required for certain sensitive areas such as foreign policy, defence and taxation. All Member States must agree before the EU can take collective action in these areas, which ensures that decisions reflect a full consensus and not a decision imposed by a majority. This protects the national sovereignty of certain Member States, but as seen in 2022 with the slow response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this mechanism can

cause deadlock and problems when a swift response is the most needed.

Overall, these mechanisms, although positive for national sovereignty, limit the ability of the EU to act as a collective unit. The areas that are some of the most important for strategic autonomy, such as foreign policy and defence, are subject to unanimity, delaying processes and limiting EU strategic autonomy.

III. EU's Goal of Strategic Autonomy

The EU's goal for strategic autonomy stemmed from the realisation that reliance on global powers—particularly the United States for security and China for commerce and technology—could jeopardise its long-term security and policy goals.⁵ “Strategic Autonomy” is the ability of the EU to operate autonomously on the international scene, especially in the areas of military, technology, energy, and economic resilience, without excessive dependence on outside forces. In spite of growing international tensions and great power competition, this goal aims to guarantee that the EU can defend its interests and values. Brexit, the 2008 financial crisis, and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have highlighted the necessity for the EU to strengthen its internal borders. Strategic autonomy thus signifies an endeavour to increase self-sufficiency while decreasing vulnerabilities.

⁵ Sabatino, Ester, Daniel Fiott, Dick Zandee, Christian Mölling, Claudia Major, Jean-Pierre Maulny, Daniel Keohane, and Domenico Moro. “The Quest for European Strategic Autonomy – A Collective Reflection.” Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep28792>.

There are certain key areas that strategic autonomy is the most necessary in.⁶ The first is defence and security. The EU is pursuing efforts to establish an autonomous security framework. The European Defence Fund (EDF), designed to fund joint defence projects, and the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) programme seek to improve military cooperation and minimise reliance on NATO while maintaining EU-US collaboration. The EU is likewise working to develop its domestic economy in order to lessen reliance on others. The establishment of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) and the promotion of "Made in Europe" initiatives help EU businesses and industries weather economic shocks and supply chain disruptions.⁷ The European Green Deal, which aims to minimise energy dependence on non-EU nations and achieve energy transition and carbon neutrality by 2050, is part of this economic resilience goal.

The EU is aiming to increase its technological capabilities, particularly in strategic fields, such as semiconductor manufacturing, digital infrastructure, and artificial intelligence (AI), in reaction to the U.S. and China's increasing technological dominance. In order to avoid becoming overly dependent on non-European suppliers and to enhance cybersecurity within EU borders,

⁶ Aline Burni et al., issue brief, *Progressive Pathways To European Strategic Autonomy: How Can the EU Become More Independent in an Increasingly Challenging World?*, March 2023, https://feeps-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/PB_Progressive-pathways-to-European-strategic-autonomy-.pdf.

⁷ Barbara Lippert, Nicolai von Ondarza, and Volker Perthes, eds., publication, *European Strategic Autonomy: Actors, Issues, Conflicts of Interests*, March 2019, https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/62346/ssoar-2019-lippert_et_al-European_strategic_autonomy_actor_s_issues.pdf?sequence=1.

the EU's Digital Decade project establishes goals for the development of digital infrastructure, including 5G networks and artificial intelligence.⁸

Despite the EU having set some clear goals for achieving strategic autonomy in the future, this task remains complex due to diverging national interests. France, for example, supports more strategic autonomy, particularly in the area of defence, while Poland and the Baltic states, due to their history, prefer to prioritise NATO and the transatlantic alliance for security,⁹ creating significant problems for European strategic autonomy.

IV. Conflicts between National Sovereignty and Strategic Autonomy

Deeper integration and better coordination among Member States are frequently necessary for the EU's pursuit for strategic autonomy, especially in the areas of foreign policy, economics, and defence.¹⁰ However, because states are frequently hesitant to cede control over sensitive areas, these goals directly contradict the idea of national sovereignty. The EU's ambition for collective action and the national interests of individual Member States are at odds as a result of this hesitancy.

⁸ José Ignacio Torreblanca and Giorgos Verdi, "Control-Alt-Deliver: A Digital Grand Strategy for the European Union," ECFR, October 8, 2024, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/control-alt-deliver-a-digital-grand-strategy-for-the-european-union/>.

⁹ Ulrike Franke and Tara Varma, rep., *Independence Play: Europe's Pursuit of Strategic Autonomy*, July 2019, <https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/Independence-play-Europe-s-pursuit-of-strategic-autonomy.pdf>.

¹⁰ Charlotte Beaucillon, "Strategic Autonomy: A New Identity for the EU as a Global Actor," *European Papers* 8, no. 1 (July 27, 2023): 417–28, <https://doi.org/10.15166/2499-8249/664>.

Defence is undoubtedly one of the most sensitive domains when it concerns national sovereignty. Nonetheless, Member States feel a reluctance to hand over too much of their control of the military, as security is considered key to their own safekeeping, even if the EU is pursuing a more independent and stronger defence strategy. As mentioned previously, EU projects such as PESCO and the EDF have the purpose of forming a united European defence. However, as discussed, some of the states, particularly the ones in Eastern Europe, are unaligned. Poland is one of the countries that prefer to rely on their NATO partners—especially the U.S.—to confront Russia and consider NATO as indispensable even if that position is diametrical to the EU's goals of creating an independent security framework. This causes the EU to be unable to act as a single security entity and also it becomes an obstacle in the way of a strong united defence identity. The EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) thus came to be to promote unity when dealing with foreign affairs as well as security matters. However, its major problem is that the veto power of each one of the Member States can bring the decision-making to a standstill. On the flip side, one state's opposition is enough to veto a decision, thus, preventing swift action.¹¹ For instance, the EU's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine is a typical case in point.

¹¹ Julian Bergmann and Patrick Müller, "Failing Forward in the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy: The Integration of EU Crisis Management," *Journal of European Public Policy* 28, no. 10 (July 19, 2021): 1669–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2021.1954064>.

Despite some Member States supporting sanctions, other members such as Hungary have been hesitant owing to economic ties to Russia. One of the real issues with this lack of coherence is that, often, the EU's position on the international scene becomes weak and vulnerable as a result of the delays in making decisions that require the alignment of the interests of each country.

The EU can only achieve its strategic autonomy if it is a strong economy and, similarly, if it comes to rely on its resources more and more, especially in the fields of energy and digital infrastructure.¹²

Nonetheless, there are disagreements among the Member States where national interests sometimes outweigh EU-wide objectives. A good example of this is the EU's Green Deal, which is a commitment to the transformation of the region from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources, thus, lessening the dependency on external suppliers.¹³ Nevertheless, some countries—such as Poland—have been defiant, arguing that they are heavily dependent on coal and that drastic energy reforms will indeed entail economic costs.¹⁴ Financing actions related to strategic autonomy is also a point of contention that is constantly surfacing, banking on joint funding policies like the Recovery Fund will intensify the development process

¹² rep., *Resilient EU2030* (Spain's National Office of Foresight and Strategy, 2023).

¹³ Susanna Paleari, "The Role of Strategic Autonomy in the EU Green Transition," *Sustainability* 16, no. 6 (March 21, 2024): 2597, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16062597>.

¹⁴ Szymon Kardaś, "From Coal to Consensus: Poland's Energy Transition and Its European Future," ECFR, November 29, 2024, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/from-coal-to-consensus-polands-energy-transition-and-its-european-future/>.

within the bloc. Some states are unwilling to issue shared debt and prefer to maintain national control over fiscal policies which would otherwise allow the EU to fund large-scale projects in their prioritised areas.

The unanimity principle in such crucial fields like defence, foreign policy, and taxation usually leads to a severe institutional dead end. The Member States that put national sovereignty at the top of their agenda can thwart or postpone the EU's efforts they consider to be encroaching on their independence. Thus, critical challenges that require fast and coordinated actions face a delay in response. The diverging takes highlight the challenging balance the EU is grappling with. This issue is the main dividing line between the EU and the individual countries that demand national sovereignty to be safeguarded even though cohesion between state members of the EU is required. The balance is such that the EU has to rely on a hybrid vision that often confines its potential to become a fully sovereign, globally influential actor.

V. Brexit: Why Leaving the EU Challenged the UK and Highlighted the Need for EU Strategic Autonomy

Brexit was arguably primarily motivated by Britain's wish to regain certain powers, in relation to laws, borders and the economy,¹⁵ but the consequences have exposed some weaknesses.

From an economic perspective, Brexit caused some barriers to trade with the EU, which until then had provided the UK with unrestricted access to the whole EU single market of 450 million people. As a result, there has been an increase in costs and time taken to export from the UK. This hinders sectors, like manufacturing and agriculture, that were highly reliant on EU markets. Additionally, the operational presence of the EU in UK financial services has decreased, as some firms have migrated to Europe, leading to a diluted prominence of London as a financial centre.¹⁶

Beyond economics, Brexit also caused greater diplomatic isolation of the UK. The UK has lost its direct ability to shape EU foreign policy and has therefore diminished its capacity to promote and be part of European diplomatic initiatives. This has made it more difficult for the UK to engage in the pursuit of certain international objectives. For example, when it came to trade negotiations, particularly the EU's free trade agreements (FTAs) with major economies like Japan and Canada, the UK had to negotiate its own agreements independently. Even though it has been able to secure deals, it is a lot harder to secure these deals in the first place, as it no longer benefits from the collective bargaining power of the EU.

In particular, Brexit illustrated how a country's independence can generate vulnerabilities, thus enhancing

¹⁵ Michael Keating, "Taking Back Control? Brexit and the Territorial Constitution of the United Kingdom," *Journal of European Public Policy* 29, no. 4 (February 2, 2021): 491–509, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2021.1876156>.

¹⁶ Eivind Friis Hamre and William Wright, rep., *BREXIT & THE CITY: THE IMPACT SO FAR*, April 2021, <https://media2-col.corriereobjects.it>

the EU's narrative around strategic autonomy.¹⁷ As a collective entity, the EU possesses a more advantageous position than any Member State that would want to act independently -as evidenced by Brexit-, which enables it to negotiate favourable agreements with global trade partners. Furthermore, the experience of Brexit has highlighted the necessity for a more integrated EU domestic policy framework, aimed at preventing citizens and Member States from questioning the merits of integration.

The EU's ongoing commitment to strategic autonomy is essential for maintaining its influence on the global stage, ensuring stability, and bolstering resilience against external economic and political pressures. The implications of Brexit have led EU leaders to reflect on the consequences of disunity, emphasising the significance of cohesion over the pursuit of individual sovereignty. Initiatives such as the EU Recovery Fund exemplify a shift towards economic solidarity, addressing the distinct challenges faced by each Member State as a means of averting further departures.

In this context, Brexit serves as a critical reminder that a robust and unified EU is better positioned to achieve autonomy and respond adeptly to global challenges. Consequently, the EU's strategic autonomy initiatives, including enhancing defence collaboration and ensuring technological independence, are integral to mitigating the disadvantages observed in the UK's route of separation.

VI. Limitations on the EU's Global Influence

A major reason as to why the EU cannot be as globally influential as it could is due to the requirement of consensus in key foreign policy and defence areas. This provision, created to preserve the national sovereignty action, also constrains the EU's ability to respond effectively and quickly to external crises. This is evidenced in cases like penalties for Russia, the answer to China's violations of human rights, and the mechanics of international relations in the Middle East. Since any individual Member State can veto EU decisions regarding these areas, it leads to slow responses, or diluted collective actions, reducing the collective weight of the EU in the global arena.

In addition, strategic autonomy implies an EU with its own defence capabilities, yet the unwillingness of some Member States to engage with EU-based defence tools means that NATO remains the key security provider for most EU countries, not least for Eastern European states. This dependence on NATO — shaped by an emphasis on transatlantic ties in some states — limits the EU's ability to operate autonomously in defence; thus reducing the EU to the status of a regional instead of a global security actor.

The EU, despite being one of the largest economic blocs in the world, faces limitations in its capacity for autonomous action due to its dependence on global trade

¹⁷ Benjamin Martill and Angelos Chryssogelos, "You're Projecting! Global Britain, European Strategic Autonomy and the Discursive Rescue of the Internationalised State," *European Security*, November 13, 2024, 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2024.2425641>.

partners such as the United States, China, and Russia.¹⁸ During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, the EU encountered considerable challenges in securing essential medical supplies and critical raw materials, highlighting the significant reliance on third countries. Additionally, the EU's energy dependencies further expose it to external pressures, as illustrated by its cautious approach to implementing sanctions on energy suppliers. Such dependencies notably impact the EU's bargaining power in trade negotiations, compelling it to take into account the economic ramifications for its member states when formulating foreign policy positions.

In the contemporary landscape of digital transformation, achieving technological independence has emerged as an essential factor in establishing global influence. However, the EU grapples with major obstacles in advancing its digital infrastructure and diminishing its dependence on technology from the U.S. and China.

Although the EU's Digital Decade strategy aspires to cultivate digital resilience, Europe lags in critical domains such as semiconductor production, 5G infrastructure, and artificial intelligence.¹⁹

This technological dependency constrains the EU's strategic autonomy in areas including cybersecurity,

innovation, and economic stature, as reliance on foreign technologies may be compromised during periods of geopolitical tension.

Furthermore, the EU's influence is curtailed by the heterogeneous interests of its Member States, each possessing distinct economic, political, and historical priorities. For instance, Southern European nations often prioritise building relationships with North Africa,²⁰ whereas Eastern European countries emphasise security issues pertinent to Russia.²¹ These diverse priorities complicate the EU's efforts to establish a cohesive foreign policy stance, thereby undermining its ability to project a unified presence on the global stage. Responses to initiatives such as China's Belt and Road Initiative or decisions regarding development aid for Africa frequently reflect a fragmented approach rather than a consolidated EU position.

While the EU has historically championed human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, its credibility as a global leader in these spheres has been compromised by internal discord and the actions of Member States that diverge from EU principles. This decline in soft power adversely impacts the EU's global influence, eroding the moral authority that has traditionally underpinned its foreign policy initiatives.

¹⁸ Pawel Zerka and Jana Puglierin, "Keeping America Close, Russia down, and China Far Away: How Europeans Navigate a Competitive World," ECFR, February 8, 2024, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/keeping-america-close-russia-down-and-china-far-away-how-europeans-navigate-a-competitive-world/>.

¹⁹ David Elliot, "EU Falling Short on Digital Transformation, Report Says," World Economic Forum, July 19, 2024, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2024/07/eu-digital-transformation-lagging/>.

²⁰ Silvia Colombo, "A Tale of Several Stories: Eu-North Africa Relations Revisited," ECDPM, November 6, 2018, <https://ecdpm.org/work/north-africa-hope-in-troubled-times-volume-7-issue-4-autumn-2018/a-tale-of-several-stories-eu-north-africa-relations-revisited>.

²¹ Marie Dumoulin, "One Step beyond: Why the EU Needs a Russia Strategy," ECFR, August 22, 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/article/one-step-beyond-why-the-eu-needs-a-russia-strategy/>.

VII. Conclusion

This paper has examined the EU's pursuit of strategic autonomy in light of growing external pressures, particularly in the context of economic interdependence and foreign policy challenges. Central to the discussion is the tension between national sovereignty and the collective decision-making required for deeper integration. Through the analysis of key areas such as the EU's economic unity, its capacity for a unified foreign and defence policy, and the role of member states in shaping integration, this paper argues that a more integrated EU is essential for ensuring its global competitiveness and security in an increasingly multipolar world.

This paper has argued that strategic autonomy provides a compelling framework for addressing this challenge. By reducing reliance on external powers in critical sectors such as energy, defence, and technology, the EU can strengthen its capacity to act independently in global affairs. However, achieving this vision requires deeper European integration. While the principle of sovereignty remains deeply rooted in the identity of member states, the complexities of today's challenges— from transnational security threats to economic vulnerabilities—demand supranational collective solutions, transcending national boundaries. The case for deeper integration lies in its potential to amplify the EU's strategic capabilities, ensure more effective decision-making, and leverage the Union's unparalleled potential as a unified political and economic bloc.

The road to strategic autonomy is fraught with challenges. Diverging national interests and varying levels of commitment to integration pose significant hurdles. However, the complexity of transnational threats, such as security issues and economic vulnerabilities, requires a collective approach. Deeper integration is essential to overcoming these challenges and ensuring that the EU can act effectively on the global stage.

Ultimately, the case for strategic autonomy highlights the necessity of European integration as both a means and an end. It would equip the EU with the capacity to navigate a turbulent international landscape and assert its sovereignty on the global arena, all while reaffirming the EU's foundational ideals of unity, cooperation, and collective strength. The path forward will require leadership, political courage, and an unwavering commitment to the European project. Should the EU rise to this challenge, it will not only secure its place as a resilient, capable, and independent global actor, but also demonstrate how unity and integration can transform challenges into opportunities for growth, stability, and influence.

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