YSU Journal of International Affairs
2026, Vol. 2, No. 2, 21-39
https://doi.org/10.46991/jia.2026.2.2.021

YEREVAN STATE UNIVERSITY PUBLISHING HOUSE

STRATEGIC AUTONOMY OF THE EUROPEAN UNION: THE RESOURCE-CONVERSION DEFICIT AND A VALUE-BASED MODEL OF SECURITY PROVISION

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Abstract

This article analyzes the conditions under which the European Union can convert its considerable demographic, economic, technological, institutional and military potential into the capacity to provide security autonomously. The point of departure is the shifting transatlantic division of responsibilities, driven by the growing salience of the Indo-Pacific in US strategy, the return of high-intensity warfare to Europe and mounting pressure on European defense readiness. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of EU strategic documents and selected official external sources, the article introduces the category of a resource-conversion deficit. The concept explains the disparity between Europe's aggregate resources and its ability to align them politically, coordinate them institutionally and employ them operationally. The second element of the contribution involves treating values as a conditional strategic resource. They constrain the EU's short-term flexibility but, when supported by adequate material capabilities and consistent practice, they enhance the predictability, legitimacy and durability of the security provided. Strategic autonomy is presented as the development of European agency within the transatlantic system.

Keywords: *strategic autonomy, European Union, security provider, resource-conversion deficit, values, NATO.*

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Received: 01.09.2026
Revised: 13.10.2026
Accepted: 20.10.2026

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Introduction

The contemporary debate on the European Union's strategic autonomy stems from the disproportion between the scale of European resources and the capacity to harness them for shaping the security environment. The EU brings together 27 Member States, approximately 450 million inhabitants, a vast internal market, an advanced technological and industrial base, and a broad array of financial, regulatory and diplomatic instruments. Yet its collective capacity to act in the security domain remains markedly weaker than this potential would suggest. The *Strategic Compass* links the growth of European responsibility to the development of the EU as a stronger and more capable security provider, while the 2025 *White Paper* points to years of under-investment in readiness, the fragmentation of capabilities and the need to rebuild the European defense-industrial base.[1] The historical roots of this asymmetry lie in the post-war transatlantic order. The guarantees, military presence and leadership of the United States within NATO created the conditions for the reconstruction and integration of Western Europe, while simultaneously securing for the United States a lasting strategic position on the continent. The system served the fundamental interests of both sides and for decades reduced the need to develop an autonomous European defense capability. After the Cold War, cuts in expenditure, armed forces, stockpiles and production capacity entrenched this dependence to a degree that largely resulted from the choices of the European states themselves.[2] The contemporary shift of US attention towards the Indo-Pacific and Russia's war against Ukraine are changing the functionality of the existing division of roles. European security now demands a greater capacity to act under a variable level of US engagement.[3]

This article asks under what conditions the EU can convert its resources into the capability to provide security autonomously while remaining anchored in the

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[1] Council of the European Union, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence – For a European Union That Protects Its Citizens, Values and Interests and Contributes to International Peace and Security*, doc. 7371/22 (Brussels, March 21, 2022), 2, 6, 13, https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7371-2022-INIT/en/pdf; European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *Joint White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030*, JOIN(2025) 120 final (Brussels, March 19, 2025), 1–3, https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6d5db69-e0ab-4bec-9dc0-3867b4373019_en.

[2] Geir Lundestad, "Empire by Invitation? The United States and Western Europe, 1945–1952," *Journal of Peace Research* 23, no. 3 (1986): 263–71, https://doi.org/10.1177/002234338602300305; Bjørn Olav Knutsen, "A Weakening Transatlantic Relationship? Redefining the EU–US Security and Defence Cooperation," *Politics and Governance* 10, no. 2 (2022): 165–70, https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v10i2.5024; Linde Desmaele, "America's 'China-First' Grand Strategy and the Transatlantic Bargain: Revisiting the Security–Economics Nexus," *International Politics* (published online May 27, 2024): 1–6, 14–18, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-024-00577-6.

[3] United States, *2026 National Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC, 2026), 4, 11, 18–20, https://media.defense.gov/2026/Jan/23/2003864773/-1/-1/0/2026-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY.PDF; European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *Preserving Peace – Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030*, JOIN(2025) 27 final (Brussels, October 16, 2025), 1–3, https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/56143695-ed00-4a70-a1de-c97e0b05ff07_en.

transatlantic system and in its character as a community of values. The initial hypothesis is that the Union's fundamental weakness lies in the mechanisms that translate aggregated potential into joint decisions and action. This problem is captured by the category of a resource-conversion deficit, developed in the analytical section. Strategic autonomy is a response to the changing division of responsibility within the transatlantic system, and its credibility depends on political cohesion, industrial coordination, access to critical operational capabilities and the willingness of Member States to bear the costs of collective action. Another issue concerns the values that define the EU's constitutional character and the objectives of its external action.[4] Values may narrow the range of instruments and partnerships, especially in an environment of growing transactionalism and the pluralization of cooperation models. They can also increase the predictability, legitimacy and durability of European commitments. The article treats their significance as conditional: normative credibility becomes a security resource only when it rests on material capabilities and consistent practice. The practical significance of this article lies in identifying the political, institutional and operational constraints on the conversion of European resources into collective capabilities. The findings can be used for capability planning, the coordination of investments and the assessment of whether security commitments are supported by material capabilities and consistent practice.

The article sets out the analytical framework, methodology and scope of the study and reviews the literature on strategic autonomy, agency and values. The analytical sections examine the changing transatlantic division of responsibility, the EU's resource-conversion deficit and the role of values in security provision, followed by the discussion and conclusions.

Analytical Framework, Methodology and Scope of the Study

Three concepts are central to the analysis presented in this article: strategic autonomy, the resource-conversion deficit and the value-based security provider.

Strategic autonomy is gradable and relational in character. The EU may enjoy considerable regulatory or economic freedom while remaining deeply dependent in military, technological or intelligence terms. Here, strategic autonomy means the capacity to define security objectives independently, take collective decisions and mobilize the necessary means even when external partners are only partially engaged. It encompasses the ability to take a decision, access to the instruments required to implement it and the capacity to regenerate critical industrial and technological resources. The level of autonomy depends on the extent to which external

[4] *Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union*, *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 202 (June 7, 2016), arts. 2, 3(5), and 21, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX%3A12016M%2FTXT; European Union, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy* (Brussels, June 2016), 8–11, 15, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf.

dependencies affect the feasibility of a European decision.[5] This conceptualization retains NATO as the foundation of collective defense for its European members and locates autonomy in a greater European capacity to act, which can also strengthen Europe's contribution to the Alliance.[6]

The possession of resources does not predetermine strategic capability. The process leading from potential to security outcomes can be represented as a sequence: resources, conversion capacity, strategic agency and security provision. The resource-conversion deficit denotes the disproportion between the scale of resources available to the EU and its Member States, on the one hand, and the ability to reconcile them politically, activate them legally, coordinate them organizationally and apply them operationally, on the other. The notion of conversion directs attention towards mediating mechanisms: convergence of threat perceptions, political will, decision-making procedures, financing, industrial coordination, interoperability and the capacity to sustain an adopted course of action. The concept develops research on European agency by incorporating a problem known from analyses of state power, in which economic and demographic resources influence military capabilities through administration, mobilization and organization.[7]

A security provider is understood as an actor capable of recognizing threats, defining a desired state of security, mobilizing instruments and generating security goods for its own community and for partners. In the EU's case, military means are combined with economic, financial, regulatory, civilian and integration instruments.[8] Security provision thus encompasses deterrence and protection, the strengthening of resilience, the reduction of vulnerability to coercion, institutional stabilization and the creation of conditions that allow partners to preserve sovereignty and strategic freedom of choice. The language of values serves to reconstruct the way in which the EU defines the object of protection, the legitimate purposes of action and the limits of permissible instruments.[9] The category of a value-based security provider describes an actor that combines material capabilities with the institutional anchoring of cooperation and the consistent application of declared principles. It is analytical in character and does not prejudge the consistency of EU

[5] Niklas Helwig and Ville Sinkkonen, "Strategic Autonomy and the EU as a Global Actor: The Evolution, Debate and Theory of a Contested Term," *European Foreign Affairs Review* 27, special issue (2022): 2–6, 14–17, https://doi.org/10.54648/EERR2022009; Niklas Helwig, "The Ambiguity of the EU's Global Role: A Social Explanation of the Term 'Strategic Autonomy'," *European Foreign Affairs Review* 27, special issue (2022): 22–29, 35–37, https://doi.org/10.54648/EERR2022010.

[6] European Union, *Shared Vision, Common Action*, 9–11, 13; Council of the European Union, *A Strategic Compass*, 12–14.

[7] Christopher Hill, "The Capability–Expectations Gap, or Conceptualizing Europe's International Role," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 31, no. 3 (1993): 306–15, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.1993.tb00466.x; Ashley J. Tellis, Janice Bially, Christopher Layne, and Melissa McPherson, *Measuring National Power in the Postindustrial Age* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2000), 4–15, 133–39, https://doi.org/10.7249/MR1110; Johannes Lindvall, Magnus Lundgren, and Jan Teorell, "Projecting Power at Home and Abroad: Domestic State Capacity and Military Capability," *Journal of Peace Research* 63, no. 4 (2026): 507–12, 517–19, https://doi.org/10.1093/jopres/xjaf018.

[8] Council of the European Union, *A Strategic Compass*, 12–14, 17–18, 41–46.

[9] *Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union*, arts. 2, 3(5), and 21; Council of the European Union, *A Strategic Compass*, 2, 6, 12–13.

rhetoric with practice. The perspective of ontological security is used in a supporting role to interpret passages in which new defense tasks are presented as a continuation or redefinition of the EU's existing role. This perspective concerns the continuity of political identity and does not explain the material causes of autonomy or the mechanism of resource conversion.[10]

The study is based on a qualitative analysis of documents, guided by the adopted analytical categories: strategic autonomy, resources and their conversion mechanisms, forms of security provision, the function of values and the external attribution of roles. Documents are treated as sources of strategic self-definition, the assignment of responsibility and the justification of courses of action. The analysis focuses on the meaning of concepts within each document's argumentative context; their frequency is of ancillary importance. The temporal scope covers 2016–2026, with particular emphasis on the period following the adoption of the *Strategic Compass* in 2022. The core of the corpus consists of the Treaty on European Union, the *EU Global Strategy*, the *Strategic Compass*, the *Joint White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030*, *Preserving Peace – Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030*, the 2026 progress report on the implementation of the *Strategic Compass* and data from the European Defence Agency.[11] EU documents are used to reconstruct how the Union defines its own role and responsibility. The external point of reference is provided by selected official US, Russian and Chinese documents.

The article does not present a systematic comparison of Member States' security strategies, full case studies or a quantitative assessment of the EU's operational effectiveness. The example of Ukraine illustrates different forms of security provision and does not constitute a representative sample. Strategic documents indicate objectives, justifications and agreed commitments, and their adoption does not prove full implementation. External role attribution is treated as a relational indicator of agency, the content of which remains dependent on the interests and cognitive categories of the actor in question.

Literature Review: Strategic Autonomy, Agency and Values in the EU Security Policy

The literature on strategic autonomy has developed around disputes over the scope of European self-reliance, its relationship with defense integration and its impact

[10] Jennifer Mitzen, "Anchoring Europe's Civilizing Identity: Habits, Capabilities and Ontological Security," *Journal of European Public Policy* 13, no. 2 (2006): 270–74, 282–83, https://doi.org/10.1080/13501760500451709; Vincent Della Sala, "Narrating Europe: The EU's Ontological Security Dilemma," *European Security* 27, no. 3 (2018): 267–70, 278–82, https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2018.1497978.

[11] European External Action Service, *2026 Annual Progress Report on the Implementation of the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence* (Brussels, June 5, 2026), https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/2026-annual-progress-report-implementation-strategic-compass-security-and-defence_en; European Defence Agency, *Defence Data 2025–2026* (Brussels: European Defence Agency, 2026), https://eda.europa.eu/docs/default-source/eda-publications/2026-eda_defencedata_webpublic.pdf.

on transatlantic ties. The concept encompasses the capacity to conduct operations without direct US support, the reduction of critical dependencies, the development of a European industrial base and the expansion of political freedom of decision. Its ambiguity reflects the differing preferences of Member States: some associate autonomy with a stronger European pillar within NATO, while others attach greater weight to decisional independence and the capacity to act outside the Alliance's structures.[12] The debate often concentrates on the degree to which Europe could become independent of the United States. This perspective aptly captures the political disagreement but is less effective in explaining the changing function of autonomy as the transatlantic division of responsibility evolves. The literature on the US pivot towards China indicates that a larger European share in continental security is becoming part of a broader reorganization of US priorities. In this view, autonomy means the capacity to assume tasks that remain important for Europe but have declined in relative importance in the US hierarchy of priorities.[13]

Research on EU actorness identifies competences, coherence, decision-making autonomy and recognition by other actors as conditions of international agency. The concept of the capability–expectations gap highlighted the discrepancy between expectations of European foreign policy and the instruments, procedures and political will required to fulfill them. More recent work further shows that recognition of the EU as an actor remains sector-specific and depends on the type of state and policy area.[14] The literature on power complements this body of work by analyzing the processes mediating between wealth, population and technology, on the one hand, and the capacity to project force, on the other. Similar economic resources can produce different military effects depending on state capacity, mobilization, organization and institutional quality. Transferring this problem to the EU level requires considering the multi-level distribution of resources and competences. Armed forces and the bulk of military assets remain under national control, while EU institutions possess particularly developed regulatory, budgetary and coordination competences. Research on the ideational significance of autonomy confirms that its practical effects are stronger in areas where EU institutions have their own instruments.[15]

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[12] Helwig and Sinkkonen, "Strategic Autonomy and the EU as a Global Actor," 2–8, 14–17; Helwig, "The Ambiguity of the EU's Global Role," 22–29, 35–37; Tara Varma, "European Strategic Autonomy: The Path to a Geopolitical Europe," *The Washington Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (2024): 67–72, 79–82, https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2024.2327820.

[13] Desmaele, "America's 'China-First' Grand Strategy," 1–6, 14–18; Knutsen, "A Weakening Transatlantic Relationship?," 165–74.

[14] Hill, "The Capability–Expectations Gap," 306–15; Joseph Jupille and James A. Caporaso, "States, Agency, and Rules: The European Union in Global Environmental Politics," in *The European Union in the World Community*, ed. Carolyn Rhodes (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998), 213–17, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781685854485-012; Christian Rauh, "International Recognition of European Union 'Actorness': Language-Based Evidence from United Nations General Debate Speeches 1970–2020," *International Interactions* 51, no. 5 (2025): 792–800, https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2025.2530513.

[15] Tellis et al., *Measuring National Power*, 4–15, 133–39; Lindvall, Lundgren, and Teorell, "Projecting Power at Home and Abroad," 507–12, 517–19; Ana E. Juncos and Sophie Vanhoonacker, "The

The concept of Normative Power Europe portrays the EU as an actor capable of shaping standards of legitimate international conduct. The realist critique points to the selectivity of normativity, the importance of Member State interests and the material conditions for effective influence. Research on the EU as a security actor also shows that inconsistency between declared principles and practice can weaken legitimacy and the credibility of engagement.[16] This article does not examine norm diffusion, nor does it adjudicate whether the EU remains a normative power. It uses this debate to analyze a more specific problem: the impact of values on the choice of instruments, the credibility of commitments and the durability of the security provided to partners. The perspective of ontological security complements this analysis to a limited extent, concerning the continuity of the European role during the assumption of greater military responsibility.[17]

Existing research extensively discusses strategic autonomy, institutional constraints on agency and the normative character of the EU, but less often combines them in an analysis of the process leading from aggregate resources to security outcomes. The article contributes the category of a resource-conversion deficit, which explains why an increase in expenditure or potential does not automatically translate into a joint capacity to act. The second element of the contribution is the treatment of values as a conditional resource: they constrain flexibility, but with adequate capabilities and consistent practice they can enhance legitimacy, predictability and the durability of the security provided. External role attribution serves to test whether the EU's self-definition is reflected in the strategies and arrangements made with other actors.

The Changing Transatlantic Division of Responsibility for Security

The contemporary need for strategic autonomy arises from the changing conditions in which the transatlantic division of responsibility has operated. For several decades, US leadership and NATO enabled Europe to develop economic, social and institutional resources without simultaneously creating an autonomous defense capability commensurate with the scale of those resources. Changes in the threat environment and in US priorities mean that this asymmetry is now increasingly constraining European agency.

Sources of European Strategic Dependence: The post-war security dependence of Western Europe on the United States was part of an arrangement that served the fundamental interests of both sides. The European states needed guarantees against the military preponderance of the Soviet Union, while the US presence

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Ideational Power of Strategic Autonomy in EU Security and External Economic Policies," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 62, no. 4 (2024): 955–60, 967–70, https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13597.

[16] Ian Manners, "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40, no. 2 (2002): 239–42, 252–53, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00353; Adrian Hyde-Price, "'Normative' Power Europe: A Realist Critique," *Journal of European Public Policy* 13, no. 2 (2006): 218–24, 229–33, https://doi.org/10.1080/13501760500451634; Erik Skare, "Staying Safe by Being Good? The EU's Normative Decline as a Security Actor in the Middle East," *European Journal of International Security* 8, no. 3 (2023): 337–41, 348–52, https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2022.29.

[17] Mitzen, "Anchoring Europe's Civilizing Identity," 270–74, 282–83; Della Sala, "Narrating Europe," 267–70, 278–82.

stabilized relations among the Western European powers and created the conditions for reconstruction. The United States gained the position of principal organizer of the Western security architecture, with a permanent military presence and influence over the policy of a strategically vital region. The notion of an "empire by invitation" underlines the active role of the West European states in anchoring the United States on the continent.[18] US foreign and security policy supported the development of European capabilities, and successive administrations demanded a greater contribution from allies. The preferred model embedded those capabilities in NATO, nuclear deterrence and command structures that preserved the leading role of the United States. Europe's limited defense self-reliance was a structural consequence of an order premised on US strategic leadership. It is ahistorical to speak today of European "free-riding," even if there are grounds for criticizing post-Cold War neglect.[19]

After the Cold War, European states reduced budgets, force sizes, stockpiles and production capacity, and adapted their military structures to expeditionary operations conducted under conditions of Western technological superiority. The Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) developed civilian missions, limited military operations and coordination mechanisms, but the low level of strategic pressure inhibited the construction of a fuller capacity for autonomous action. The contemporary disproportion thus has a dual origin: it arose within the post-war transatlantic order and was entrenched by the post-Cold War choices of the European states.

The Shift in US Strategic Priorities and the Return of High-Intensity Warfare: The shift of US attention towards the Indo-Pacific stems from China's growing importance for US security, the US economy and the country's international position. This tendency characterized successive US administrations, although Donald Trump's policy justified it in more unequivocal and transactional terms. The *2026 National Defense Strategy* establishes the deterrence of China in the Indo-Pacific as its second priority, after the defense of the homeland and the Western Hemisphere, and assigns to European allies the primary responsibility for the conventional defense of the continent, with critical but more limited US support. The document explicitly links a greater contribution from partners to the possibility of concentrating US resources on the defense of its own territory and the Indo-Pacific.[20]

Russia's war against Ukraine has placed Europe in close proximity to a high-intensity conflict. It has confirmed the importance of NATO and US capabilities in reconnaissance, command, strategic transport, air and missile defense, long-range strike systems and nuclear deterrence. At the same time, it has revealed limited stockpiles, industrial fragmentation and the long lead times for increasing produc-

[18] Lundestad, "Empire by Invitation?," 263–71; Desmaele, "America's 'China-First' Grand Strategy," 3–6, 14–18.
[19] Knutsen, "A Weakening Transatlantic Relationship?," 166–74; European Commission and High Representative, *Joint White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030*, 1, 7–8.
[20] United States, *2026 National Defense Strategy*, 4, 11, 18–20; Desmaele, "America's 'China-First' Grand Strategy," 1–4, 16–18.

tion in Europe. Member States and EU institutions mobilized considerable financial, economic and military resources. In many areas, however, the effectiveness of action still depended on US decisions and capabilities. The *Preserving Peace – Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030* links the rebuilding of European capabilities to the enduring Russian threat, the changing global environment and the shift of traditional allies' attention towards other regions. It envisages the development of an independent, interoperable strategic capability enabling responses to threats to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Europe. The same document stresses close cooperation with NATO, the need for planning coherence and the avoidance of unnecessary duplication.[21] Autonomy is thus embedded in a more balanced division of responsibility within the Alliance.

Strategic Autonomy as a New Division of Responsibility and a Source of EU Agency: The *Strategic Compass* links increased autonomy with the protection of European values and interests, greater readiness to act and a positive contribution to transatlantic security. The EU is to develop rapid-response capabilities, strengthen resilience and support partners in the neighborhood and beyond. Autonomy thus encompasses defense, crisis response, economic and technological security, infrastructure protection and countering hybrid threats.[22] The broader repertoire of instruments allows the EU to act in areas where NATO lacks either the mandate or the appropriate set of tools.

The importance of European self-reliance also appears in the official documents of Russia and China. Russia's 2023 *Foreign Policy Concept* presents the European states as subordinated to the United States and makes the possibility of improving relations conditional on their greater independence. The Chinese policy paper on the EU attributes to the Union considerable strength and a strategically important international role, and official statements from 2025 openly support European integration and the EU's pursuit of strategic autonomy. Na Yang interprets this stance as an expression of the expectation that a more independent Europe will favor multipolarity and constrain automatic alignment with US policy.[23] These materials are self-interested role attributions and reflect the strategic preferences of their authors. The change in the European security architecture therefore consists in

[21] European Commission and High Representative, *Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030*, 1–3; European Commission and High Representative, *Joint White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030*, 3, 7–8.

[22] Council of the European Union, *A Strategic Compass*, 12–14, 41–46.

[23] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*, approved March 31, 2023, paras. 59–61, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *China's Policy Paper on the European Union* (December 2018), pts. I–II, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367378.html; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Xi Jinping Has a Phone Call with President of the European Council António Costa," January 14, 2025, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/zyxw/202501/t20250115_11534500.html; Na Yang, "How China Perceives European Strategic Autonomy: Asymmetric Expectations and Pragmatic Engagement," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 16, no. 4 (2023): 482–90, 498–503, https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poad014.

a move from an arrangement in which limited self-reliance was for a long time functional for both sides of the Atlantic to one requiring a greater European capacity to generate security. Strategic autonomy becomes an instrument of a new division of responsibility and a condition for the fuller use of European resources in protecting Europe's own territory and supporting partners.

From Potential Power to Security Provision: The EU's Resource-Conversion Deficit

An assessment of the EU's potential requires separating resources, the capacity to mobilize them and the strategic effects achieved. Aggregate data on population, economy, defense expenditure and industry describe the basis for possible action. The capacity for rapid decision-making, force deployment and the maintenance of sustained engagement depends on mobilization and coordination mechanisms.

The Multidimensional Resource Base of European Security Power: The EU's potential includes approximately 450 million inhabitants, developed education and research systems, a highly qualified workforce and competences relevant to the defense industry, cybersecurity, dual-use technologies and public administration. The single market, the euro, budgetary instruments and a common trade policy make it possible to finance defense, impose coordinated sanctions, restrict an adversary's access to technology and support the resilience and reconstruction of partner states. European industry retains advanced capabilities in aviation, space, electronics, energy, shipbuilding and arms production.[24] Member States possess significant armed forces, and their combined defense expenditure reached €418 billion in 2025, equivalent to 2.2% of aggregate GDP. Equipment procurement amounted to €115 billion. The scale of spending indicates a substantial material basis for security, but its strategic significance depends on the structure of investment, stockpiles, readiness, joint planning and interoperability. The European Defence Agency assesses that national approaches still dominate, limiting efficiency, economies of scale and long-term convergence.[25]

A particular part of the EU's potential consists of regulatory and institutional instruments. Trade policy, export controls, technological standards, sanctions, financial assistance, enlargement policy and association agreements can affect the capacity of other actors to act and strengthen the resilience of partners. The EU can combine military assistance with economic integration, institutional reforms and long-term political anchoring. This distinguishes European security provision from models based primarily on military guarantees, arms sales or *ad hoc* exchanges of benefits.

The scale of resources justifies the assessment that Europe possesses the foundations for playing a considerably larger strategic role. The sum of national potentials, however, does not automatically create a collective capability. Research on

[24] Eurostat, "Population on 1 January," online data code tps00001, https://doi.org/10.2908/tps00001; European Commission and High Representative, *Joint White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030*, 2–4, 6–8.
[25] European Defence Agency, *Defence Data 2025–2026*, 6, 16–17.

state power shows that wealth and population influence military capabilities through the quality of institutions, mobilization and organization. In the EU, this mechanism operates across the national, Union and private levels, creating more points at which coherence may be lost or delays may arise.[26]

Political, Institutional and Operational Sources of the Resource-Conversion Deficit: The fundamental constraint arises from the diversity of interests, threat perceptions and strategic cultures among Member States. Differences concern the hierarchy of threats, readiness to use force, the importance of deterrence, attitudes towards the United States and NATO, and the scope of competences that governments are willing to entrust to EU institutions. Joint strategic documents contribute to converging diagnoses, while divergences in investment priorities and in political readiness to act persist.[27]

The decision-making structure reinforces the consequences of these differences. EU security and defense policy retains its intergovernmental character; Member States control armed forces, and decisions on their use are subject to different constitutional procedures. Unanimity remains the norm in matters with military or defense implications. It protects the sovereignty of states, but at the same time lengthens the response process and makes it possible to block joint action. The capacity for external autonomy therefore depends on generating sufficient internal agreement within the EU.[28] A significant part of the deficit arises during the transformation of expenditure into capabilities. In 2025, joint procurement, including European investments and cooperation with partners outside the EU, accounted for 24% of equipment expenditure. Nineteen Member States reported European collaborative orders corresponding to 11% of aggregate spending in this category. Parallel national programs lead to duplication of research and development costs, the maintenance of multiple types of similar weaponry, smaller production runs and difficulties in supplying spare parts and ammunition.[29] Increases in expenditure may therefore outpace the development of a joint strategic capability.

The operational dimension of dependence includes satellite reconnaissance, integrated command, strategic transport, air-to-air refueling, missile defense, precision long-range strike systems and nuclear deterrence. European states possess some of these capabilities, but their scale and integration rely to a considerable degree on the US contribution and NATO structures. EU documents also point to gaps in air and missile defense, artillery, ammunition, military mobility, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, electronic warfare and strategic enablers.[30] The devel-

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[26] Tellis et al., *Measuring National Power*, 4–15, 133–39; Lindvall, Lundgren, and Teorell, "Projecting Power at Home and Abroad," 507–12, 517–19.

[27] Helwig and Sinkkonen, "Strategic Autonomy and the EU as a Global Actor," 4–8, 14–17; Varma, "European Strategic Autonomy," 67–72, 79–82.

[28] *Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union*, arts. 31(1) and 42(4); Council of the European Union, *A Strategic Compass*, 13–14.

[29] European Defence Agency, *Defence Data 2025–2026*, 17.

[30] European Commission and High Representative, *Joint White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030*, 7–8, 12–13; European Commission and High Representative, *Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030*, 2–5.

opment of autonomy requires selectively filling these gaps while maintaining alliance interoperability.

The resource-conversion deficit is not a fixed quantity. EU institutions can reduce it by financing joint projects, creating stable industrial demand, supporting collaborative procurement, coordinating planning and setting standards. The effectiveness of these instruments depends on the willingness of Member States to subordinate part of their national preferences to common priorities. Achieving autonomy requires a change in the way resources are planned and combined. A nominal increase in the volume of resources alone does not solve the conversion problem.

Ukraine constitutes the most important contemporary test of the conversion of European resources. The EU and its Member States combine arms deliveries, training, financing of procurement and production, sanctions, macro-financial assistance, energy infrastructure support, protection of displaced persons and the integration process. The 2025 *White Paper* places support for Ukraine at the center of defense readiness and advocates deeper integration of Ukrainian industry into the European defense-industrial base. The 2026 progress report on the implementation of the *Strategic Compass* presents these actions as a means of strengthening the EU's role as a security provider in its immediate neighborhood.[31] The case of Ukraine reveals both the strength of European financial and integration instruments and a persistent dependence on certain critical military capabilities.

Values as a Constraint and a Strategic Advantage for the European Security Provider

Values influence the objectives, instruments and credibility of European security provision. Their significance is ambivalent: they narrow the range of possible actions, yet they may also increase predictability, legitimacy and the durability of commitments. Analyzing this dual impact makes it possible to move beyond the simple opposition between a normative EU and a geopolitical EU.

Normative Limits to Strategic Agency: The EU's treaty-based order links external action to democracy, the rule of law, human rights, international law and peace. Military cooperation, financial assistance, sanctions and arms transfers are subject to legal procedures, political scrutiny and conditionality. This restricts the possibility of concluding short-term agreements with actors that violate the Union's fundamental norms and raises the costs of agreeing on policy in situations of conflict between values and interests.[32] The significance of this constraint increases in an environment in which security models are becoming more plural. China's Global Security Initiative bases cooperation on sovereign equality, non-interference and the right of states to choose their own political system and path of development. Official Chinese discourse has its own normative foundation and does not make support conditional on the adoption of a liberal-democratic model of governance. The policy of the Trump administration, in turn, prioritizes US interests defined in immediate terms, reciprocity and increased contributions from partners. The Euro-

[31] European Commission and High Representative, *Joint White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030*, 3, 9–12; European External Action Service, *2026 Annual Progress Report*.
[32] *Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union*, arts. 2, 3(5), and 21.

pean offer remains more institutionalized and politically demanding, which may reduce its attractiveness to governments seeking rapid support without internal reforms.[33] The credibility of values is weakened by the gap between declarations and practice. Selective responses to human rights violations, differential treatment of similar partners and the subordination of conditionality to *ad hoc* interests give rise to accusations of double standards. Research on EU policy in the southern neighborhood shows that prioritizing short-term stability may limit normative agency and weaken the institutional durability of cooperation.[34] Values thus act as a constraint, particularly when they raise expectations of the EU that are not matched by the means required to meet them.

Values as a Security Resource: Normative constraints may enhance the long-term quality of security provision. Agreements, financial procedures, monitoring mechanisms and legal oversight reduce the dependence of commitments on personal relations between leaders and on the current political climate. Values may thereby strengthen predictability and the institutional durability of cooperation, provided they are applied consistently. A particular resource of the EU is its capacity to combine security with economic, regulatory and institutional integration. Market access, legal harmonization, investment, the mobility of people and the prospect of deepening relations can durably alter the strategic environment of a partner state. In the case of Ukraine, European integration provides the foundation for Ukraine's long-term anchoring in the European security architecture. In other relationships, this mechanism operates less strongly, yet may still strengthen institutions, diversify dependencies and enhance freedom of strategic choice.[35]

Values acquire the status of a strategic resource when material capabilities and political consistency coexist. A state threatened by violence assesses a partner's credibility by the partner's willingness to bear costs, deliver equipment, maintain sanctions and provide long-term financing. Normative commitment backed by real capacity for action may distinguish the EU as a partner offering predictable and institutionalized security. Insufficient capabilities or selective practice increase the gap between expectations and outcomes. Assuming greater responsibility for security also requires that the development of military capabilities be embedded in the EU's established self-definition as a community of law, integration and values. The perspective of ontological security allows this process to be interpreted as a transformation of role: new capabilities may strengthen the continuity of European iden-

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[33] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *The Global Security Initiative Concept Paper*, February 21, 2023, sec. II, pts. 1–4, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367484.html; The White House, "America First Policy Directive to the Secretary of State," January 20, 2025, secs. 1–2, https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/america-first-policy-directive-to-the-secretary-of-state/; United States, *2026 National Defense Strategy*, 4, 11.

[34] Hyde-Price, "'Normative' Power Europe," 218–24, 229–33; Skare, "Staying Safe by Being Good?," 337–41, 348–52.

[35] European Union, *Shared Vision, Common Action*, 8–10, 15; Council of the European Union, *A Strategic Compass*, 2, 12–14; Anna Michalski and Charles F. Parker, "The EU's Evolving Leadership Role in an Age of Geopolitics: Beyond Normative and Market Power in the Indo-Pacific," *European Journal of International Security* 9, no. 2 (2024): 264–67, 272–78, https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2023.34.

tity when they are justified in terms of protecting citizens, institutions, international law and the freedom of political choice.[36] A value-based security provider thus combines the material capacity for protection with stable, institutionalized commitments. This category describes a condition of effectiveness and functions as an ideal type.

Discussion: Conditions for Value-Based Strategic Autonomy

The findings of the article support an interpretation of European dependence as an element of the transatlantic bargain that, for a significant part of the post-war period, remained functional for both sides. The existing division of roles no longer corresponds to the shift in US priorities and the European threat environment. Trump-era criticism points to a genuine imbalance of capabilities and insufficient effort on the part of some allies after the Cold War, while at the same time overlooking the historical order in which European capabilities were developed under US leadership. Strategic autonomy thus takes the form of a renegotiation of responsibility within the existing transatlantic system.[37]

The EU's main problem lies further upstream than the classic capability–expectations gap. Hill compared expectations of Europe's international role with the available instruments and the will to act. The resource-conversion deficit explains why existing resources fail to take the form of a shared capability. In the case of a state, conversion depends on administration, mobilization and organization. In the EU, it additionally operates across the national and Union levels, where resources, competences and decision-making authority are distributed. This multi-level character means that a nominal increase in expenditure may coexist with fragmentation, limited interoperability and slow decision-making.[38] The category of the resource-conversion deficit thus constitutes the central contribution of the article to security studies.

The autonomy that emerges from the analysis remains embedded in the alliance system. NATO provides planning, command and deterrence structures that would be scarcely realistic to recreate rapidly within the EU framework. The development of European capabilities may, however, alter the nature of the relationship by enabling Europe to assume greater responsibility, reduce its vulnerability to shifts in US priorities and increase its capacity to act in areas beyond the Alliance's mandate. This outcome corresponds to the strand of literature that views autonomy as the capacity to act within a partnership while maintaining allied interdependencies.[39]

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[36] Mitzen, "Anchoring Europe's Civilizing Identity," 270–74, 282–83; Della Sala, "Narrating Europe," 267–70, 278–82.

[37] Lundestad, "Empire by Invitation?," 263–71; Desmaele, "America's 'China-First' Grand Strategy," 14–18; Knutsen, "A Weakening Transatlantic Relationship?," 165–74; Helwig and Sinkkonen, "Strategic Autonomy and the EU as a Global Actor," 14–17.

[38] Hill, "The Capability–Expectations Gap," 306–15; Tellis et al., *Measuring National Power*, 4–15, 133–39; Lindvall, Lundgren, and Teorell, "Projecting Power at Home and Abroad," 507–12, 517–19; Juncos and Vanhoonacker, "The Ideational Power of Strategic Autonomy," 955–60, 967–70.

[39] Helwig and Sinkkonen, "Strategic Autonomy and the EU as a Global Actor," 14–17; Knutsen, "A Weakening Transatlantic Relationship?," 170–74; Varma, "European Strategic Autonomy," 79–82.

The analysis of values yields a conclusion that lies between the concept of normative power and the realist critique. The impact of values is conditional and encompasses both benefits and strategic costs. It depends on material capabilities, consistency of practice and the type of threat. Values enhance the credibility and durability of security provision when they institutionalize commitments and are upheld through real means. They weaken agency when they generate high expectations without adequate readiness to act or are applied selectively.[40] The treatment of values as a conditional resource constitutes the second element of the article's original contribution.

External role attribution remains sectoral and uneven. The United States expects increased European responsibility. Russia and China interpret autonomy through the prism of their own visions of international order. This outcome corresponds to research indicating the relational and sector-specific nature of European agency.[41] The source base does not permit generalization regarding the global perception of the EU. It does show, however, that the capacity to provide security requires both the internal conversion of resources and external recognition of commitments as relevant to the calculations of partners.

The combination of both propositions yields a coherent research model. The resource-conversion deficit explains the gap between potential and capacity for action. The category of the value-based security provider concerns the character and quality of the outcome achieved. Effective autonomy thus requires material capabilities, political cohesion, the institutional capacity to mobilize resources and the credibility of the principles that define the purpose of their use. The model may be applied in further comparative research on individual capability sectors, Member States' strategies and regional perceptions of European security policy.

Conclusions

The need for strategic autonomy arises from the changing transatlantic division of responsibility and the growing risk associated with Europe's insufficient capacity for independent action. The United States remains the principal ally, and NATO is the foundation of collective defense for most EU Member States. The growing significance of the Indo-Pacific and the return of high-intensity warfare, however, demand greater European agency in protecting Europe's own territory and supporting partners. The EU possesses a demographic, economic, technological, industrial and institutional base that enables it to play a considerably greater role as a security provider. The principal constraint lies in the mechanisms for transforming aggregated resources into shared capabilities and lasting strategic effects. Divergence of interest, the intergovernmental character of decision-making, industrial fragmenta-

[40] Manners, "Normative Power Europe," 239–42, 252–53; Hyde-Price, "'Normative' Power Europe," 218–24, 229–33; Skare, "Staying Safe by Being Good?," 337–41, 348–52; Michalski and Parker, "The EU's Evolving Leadership Role," 272–78.

[41] Rauh, "International Recognition of European Union 'Actorness'," 792–800; Yang, "How China Perceives European Strategic Autonomy," 482–90, 498–503.

tion and dependence on certain US operational capabilities create a strategic resource-conversion deficit. Reducing it requires joint planning, investment coordination, interoperability and the political capacity to sustain agreed action. The resource-conversion deficit complements Hill's capability–expectations gap by focusing on the process through which existing resources take the form of shared capabilities.[42] Values constrain certain EU instruments and partnerships, yet, given an appropriate level of material capabilities and consistency, they can enhance the predictability, legitimacy and durability of the security provided. This finding relates the concept of normative power developed by Manners[43] to Hyde-Price's realist critique.[44] The analysis addresses the difference between these perspectives by identifying how material capabilities, consistency of practice and the type of threat condition the impact of values. The foremost challenge of strategic autonomy, therefore, consists in transforming European potential into collective agency without losing the characteristics that distinguish the EU from more transactional models of cooperation. A value-based security provider remains anchored in the transatlantic system, while simultaneously possessing the capacity to protect its own territory, support partners and co-shape the regional security architecture.

In practical terms, the framework can be used to identify where joint planning, investment coordination, interoperability and collective decision-making need to be strengthened. It can also support the assessment of whether commitments to partners are matched by material capabilities and consistent practice.

Conflict of Interests
The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.
Ethical Standards
The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.
Funding: This research was funded by the National Science Centre (Poland), grant number 2025/59/B/HS5/00775.
AI Declaration: The article was written in Polish. The author used AI tools (DeepL, Grammarly) to translate the text into English and for language editing.

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[42] Hill, "The Capability–Expectations Gap," 306–15.
[43] Manners, "Normative Power Europe," 239–42.
[44] Hyde-Price, "'Normative' Power Europe," 218–24, 229–33.

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