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IN A WORLD IN UPHEAVAL, CAN EUROPE EMERGE AS A GLOBAL LEADER?

RAOUL DELCORDE*
Ambassador (rtd) of Belgium
Full Member of the Académie Royale de Belgique
Member of the Académie des sciences d'outre-mer in France

Abstract

This discussion article examines whether Europe can emerge as a major global power amid profound changes in the international security environment. It argues that the European Union's capacity to assume greater geopolitical responsibility is shaped by four interrelated developments: Europe's longstanding structural dependence on the United States and NATO; Washington's strategic reorientation toward great-power competition, particularly with China; the growing erosion of the liberal international order; and internal political and institutional challenges within the European Union. Against this background, the article explores the increasingly prominent concept of European strategic autonomy. Rather than interpreting autonomy as political or military emancipation from the United States, it presents it as the capacity of European states to act strategically, assume greater responsibility for their security, and exercise greater freedom in defining objectives and choosing partners while preserving the transatlantic relationship. The article discusses both the opportunities and constraints associated with this trajectory, including European military capabilities, defense cooperation, nuclear deterrence, political cohesion, and decision-making mechanisms. It concludes that the European Union possesses significant economic, diplomatic, and emerging military capabilities, but that its transformation into a fully autonomous great power remains constrained by institutional fragmentation, resource limitations, and continued reliance on the United States.

Keywords: *European Union, structural dependence, strategic autonomy, great-power competition, international order.*

* H.E. Dr. Raoul Delcorde is an Ambassador of Belgium (honorary) with the rank of minister plenipotentiary (1st class) (former Ambassador of Belgium in Sweden, Poland, and Canada). He holds a PhD in Political Science (International Relations). Amb. Delcorde is a Full Member of the Académie Royale de Belgique and is also an Associate Member of the Académie des sciences d'outre-mer in Paris, France, and the author of books on diplomacy and international relations. He is a Professor emeritus at the Université Catholique de Louvain and a Board member of The International Institute for Diplomacy – Switzerland (IID). He has served as Director Middle-East/North Africa, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belgium; Deputy Director General for Multilateral Affairs and Deputy Director, Directorate General Europe.
Email: raoul.delcorde@uclouvain.be; raoul_delcorde@hotmail.com **ORCID iD:** 0000-0003-3190-4363

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Can the European Union rise to the rank of a major diplomatic and military power? I will try to offer a number of points for consideration, based on a realistic assessment of the Union's current situation and its regional environment.

Europeans' Structural Dependence on the United States and NATO

In recent years, Europe's immediate neighborhood has been marked by growing instability and the resurgence of conflicts. After nearly three decades of relative calm following the end of the Cold War, Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, followed by the military aggression of 2022, has brought issues of collective defense and security back to the forefront of European concerns.[1] The states of Central and Eastern Europe now feel threatened by a revanchist and aggressive Russia, whose military capabilities have been significantly strengthened thanks to the "new look" reforms launched in 2008.

Even before the outbreak of the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the European security environment had already deteriorated significantly. This deterioration stemmed in particular from Russia's large-scale military exercises—conducted on a regular basis—as well as its use of information, cyber, and hybrid operations directed against neighboring states.

The deterioration of the situation in the Middle East and North Africa—that is, along Europe's southern border—has heightened the sense of regional instability. These developments have reignited the debate on European defense and reinforced the idea that Europe must be capable of ensuring its own protection, including militarily.

However, in the post-Cold War period, most European states prioritized normative power and economic power—at the expense of military power—to advance their interests.

This has resulted in a structural dependence of Europeans on the United States and NATO for their territorial defense—an arrangement whose limitations and vulnerabilities were becoming increasingly apparent. This is the first point I wished to make.

A Fundamental Shift in US Security and Defense Priorities

The second observation is the fundamental shift in US security and defense priorities—particularly toward Asia—and the resulting change in the transatlantic relationship. After several decades of cooperation focused first on the Soviet threat and then on the fight against terrorism, Washington's new watchword is "great-power competition," with China as its main rival.

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[1] It is more appropriate to speak of an "invasion" or "aggression" rather than a "Russian-Ukrainian war," since Ukraine is not at war with Russia but is defending itself—with the support of the European Union, Canada, and several other states. See United Nations General Assembly, "Aggression against Ukraine," resolution ES-11/1, March 2, 2022, https://docs.un.org/A/RES/ES-11/1.

In a context marked by intensified strategic competition and the weakening of the rules-based international order, the United States faces a growing number of military challenges. Given the scale of its global commitments, growing domestic economic and political constraints, and the rise of rival powers, it seems unlikely that Washington will be able to maintain, in the long term, the same level of commitment to European stability. The recent announcement of a withdrawal—albeit a limited one—of US troops stationed in Europe illustrates this point.

This development is fueling a growing debate within European foreign ministries over the question of who, how, and to what extent European states can and should now assume greater responsibility for their own security. Concerns have intensified further during the Trump presidency, whose positions have called into question not only the foundations of the transatlantic order but also those of the liberal international order. Washington is now challenging multilateralism—the rules-based order that underpins the European vision. But since the start of Donald Trump's second term, the situation has changed. The US administration has now dispelled any ambiguity and is openly embarking on a profound restructuring of its strategic priorities. The US's acknowledged refocusing on competition between major powers—particularly China—as well as a refocusing on the Western Hemisphere, is reflected in practice by a desire to reduce the US's strategic presence in Europe. This shift creates an urgent need for Europeans to assume greater responsibility for their own security. This development comes against a specific backdrop in which Europe has already been weakened by other shocks: the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, which have led Europe to seek greater autonomy or sovereignty in various areas, notably global health; Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the European support that followed have led Europe to have to assume its power and define how it intends to project it. Whether we refer to European strategic autonomy, European sovereignty or European strategic action—one thing is certain: Europeans cannot afford to sidestep the pressing question of their capacity for action, not only in their immediate neighborhood, but also on a global stage that is coming under increasing pressure due to tensions between the United States and China.

The United States now favors an approach based on state sovereignty and bilateral relations, to the detriment of the multilateral frameworks to which Europe remains committed. The bilateral military agreement recently concluded between Poland and the United States, aimed at maintaining US troops on Polish soil, is a telling example of this. The Trump 2 administration is now embracing a multipolar world and a refocusing on the Western Hemisphere and Asia to contain China, continuing the "pivot" initiated under Obama. In practical terms, this translates into a disengagement from the European continent. Even staunch Atlanticists, such as Friedrich Merz and Donald Tusk, are now calling for a reduction in military dependence on the United States.

Let's also take a look at what is happening in Greenland. This island, which is a Danish dependency, is becoming a new source of tension between Europe and the United States. Donald Trump has revived the idea of buying the territory, citing

security risks posed by Russia or China, and even suggesting that he might take more decisive action if necessary. Denmark and the Greenlandic authorities have categorically condemned these threats and reaffirmed their sovereignty over the territory. And the presence of the US base at Pituffik serves as a reminder of just how strategically important the region is. For the European Union, this episode reveals one thing: sovereignty remains fragile in the face of a partner that can, at times, become unpredictable.

Furthermore, President Trump has introduced an openly transactional approach, under which US commitments depend on allies' financial contributions or "good behavior." This approach calls into question one of NATO's founding principles, set forth in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, according to which the security of one member is a prerequisite for the security of all.[2]

A General Collapse of the Liberal Order

Closely linked to transatlantic dynamics, the liberal international order is undergoing a process of general disintegration, even as most Europeans continue to regard it as of central importance, without the contours of an alternative order clearly emerging.

This challenge is not limited to the United States. It extends to other major international actors, foremost among them Russia and China, which challenge several central components of this order. The circle of states adopting a revisionist stance in this regard is thus expanding. Furthermore, actors with divergent normative views and interests are actively seeking to divide Europeans within the European Union and to influence its internal functioning.

For a long time, Europe has viewed itself as a "civil" power, a "normative" power, or even a "transformational" power. Through its trade policy, its shared resources (the space sector, for example), its policy, that is to say, its aid policy (particularly development aid), its partnership and free trade agreements, its single market and its ability to regulate it, its single currency, and its capacity to transform its close partners through its Neighbourhood Policy (2004), the EU has established itself as a major economic and legal power, defending both its interests and its values—that is to say, a vision of a "rules-based multilateral order." A specifically military dimension has been added to this essentially civilian dimension. Since 2003, the EU has launched 40 operations under its "Common Security and Defence Policy" (CSDP), 20 of which are ongoing in 2026. It has been particularly active in the Balkans, where it has deployed increasing resources as it has taken over from NATO, and in maritime security operations (off the coast of Somalia, off the coast of Libya and in the Red Sea).

The war in Ukraine undoubtedly provides the most striking example of this increased European power, which has been able to impose heavy sanctions on Russia (more than 20 rounds of sanctions) and provide substantial assistance to Kyiv

[2] North Atlantic Treaty, signed April 4, 1949, art. 5, https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/1949/04/04/the-north-atlantic-treaty.

(200 billion euros in economic and military support, including aid from member states). Without being a belligerent in the strict sense of the term, the EU has been able to redress the balance of power between Ukraine and Russia, and defend Ukraine's sovereign choice to align itself with Europe. However, the supply of lethal weapons through the European Peace Facility (EPF) mechanism has demonstrated just how determined Europeans are to contribute as much as possible to a Ukrainian victory. The significance of this Copernican revolution cannot be overstated: for the first time in the EU's history, the Union has supplied lethal weapons, and to a country that is not (yet) a member of either the EU or NATO.[3] Since the implementation of the EPF, a proposal to proceed with joint purchases of ammunition and missiles for Ukraine has been put forward, and another proposal to jointly produce this ammunition within the EU was adopted in May 2023. In November 2025, the European Parliament adopted the very first European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP), effectively enshrining the principle of "European preference." With a budget of €1.5 billion, it aims to encourage the launch of joint armaments projects and to limit the cost of components manufactured outside the EU, and will also enable the launch of a €300 million support instrument for Ukraine.[4] However, these measures are not enough to provide Ukraine with all the weapons it needs to secure a decisive victory, and Europe has committed to doing more.

Internal Challenges to the European Union

In several European countries, the rise of Euroskeptic and nationalist governments now threatens to profoundly undermine the continent's political cohesion and solidarity, thereby contributing to the fragmentation of the European Union. Combined with external crises, these internal dynamics are placing considerable pressure on the Union's normative, political, and institutional structures.

The most obvious manifestation of this fragility was the 2016 British referendum on Brexit, which, incidentally, took place shortly before the launch of the European Union's Global Security Strategy.[5] Brexit disproved the long-held conviction among institutions and member states that European integration was following an irreversible path toward ever-closer and more extensive integration. What had seemed unthinkable then came to pass: the process of European integration proved to be reversible.

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[3] Council of the European Union, Council Decision (CFSP) 2022/338 of 28 February 2022 on an Assistance Measure under the European Peace Facility for the Supply to the Ukrainian Armed Forces of Military Equipment, and Platforms, Designed to Deliver Lethal Force, art. 1, *Official Journal of the European Union* L 60 (February 28, 2022): 1–4, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dec/2022/338/oj/eng.

[4] Council of the European Union, "European Defence Industry Programme: Council Gives Final Approval," December 8, 2025, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/12/08/european-defence-industry-programme-council-gives-final-approval/.

[5] European Union, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy* (June 2016), https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf.

Brexit also placed France in a pivotal position with regard to European security. Together with Germany, France deemed it essential to demonstrate that the European project remained alive. For France, this translated into a commitment to pursue an ambitious Common Security and Defence Policy program capable of evolving toward enhanced cooperation. This debate has expanded to include sensitive issues, notably that of nuclear deterrence. Indeed, some believe that, should France so decide, nuclear weapons could contribute to the protection of all European Union member states.

In a security context marked both by Russia's resurgence as a major power and by terrorist threats at Europe's southern borders, the development of a European security and defense policy appears to be a natural choice. It is within this framework that a central concept now takes center stage: that of strategic autonomy.

Strategic Autonomy

To clarify the debate, I will present—in a deliberately educational manner—several arguments in favor of strategic autonomy, as well as certain points that could fuel opposition to it. This overview should then facilitate a discussion, since it is precisely around this concept that the strengthening of Europe's military and security capabilities is currently taking shape.

For the majority of policymakers and analysts, the rationale for strategic autonomy lies above all in strengthening Europe's capacity for action. It constitutes a conceptual and operational framework describing the means Europeans would need to act in a truly strategic manner. Specifically, the aim is to equip the European Union's foreign policy with more robust tools when European and American interests do not align. This issue arises particularly in connection with military operations in which the United States does not wish to participate, especially on the African continent.

Moreover, the European Union would not be the sole beneficiary of such a development. Advocates of strategic autonomy emphasize that NATO and, more broadly, the transatlantic relationship could benefit from an overall strengthening of European capabilities. This is commonly referred to as the "European dimension of NATO," a topic currently the subject of intense debate in Brussels. From this perspective, member states would maintain a single set of forces that could be made available to either the European Union or NATO. Strategic autonomy would thus address a long-standing demand from the United States for more equitable burden-sharing within the Alliance.

For the vast majority of its proponents, strategic autonomy should be understood as an essentially practical proposal. It implies neither radical emancipation, nor self-sufficiency, nor a rejection of existing alliances. Rather, it aims to guarantee the freedom to choose partners according to one's own rules. The objective is therefore not to pursue a security policy in political or military isolation, but to have the capacity to decide on the objectives pursued and to control the outcomes. Europeans have developed their capacity to tackle the economic and security chal-

lenges posed by the interdependence from which they have drawn their strength. They must now defend the transatlantic alliance and their ambition to turn it into a partnership of equals. Preparing for Europe's future begins now and involves the Herculean task of answering the following question: what does Europe need to make Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union applicable? Article 42(7) is the EU's solidarity clause in the face of external threats. It stipulates that "if a Member State is the victim of an armed attack on its territory, the other Member States shall have an obligation to aid and assist it by all means at their disposal." The wording of this article makes it even more binding than Article 5 of the NATO Treaty.[6] However, it does not specify how member states are to go about this, whether through EU institutions or intergovernmental cooperation. Furthermore, Europe has made enormous progress in providing military aid to Ukraine and has now surpassed the United States in terms of commitment: 50 per cent of military aid to Ukraine now comes from European countries.

From this perspective, strategic autonomy goes beyond a strictly defensive or reactive conception of security. It is not merely a matter of preserving the way the European Union operates, but of incorporating a dimension of proactive shaping: the ability to establish, modify, and enforce international rules, rather than merely following standards defined by other actors.

This vision of strategic autonomy naturally draws criticism and reservations. Unsurprisingly, many of these objections come from the United States, where warnings are being raised that an excessive emphasis on this autonomy could unnecessarily marginalize the American role, weaken NATO, and exacerbate transatlantic tensions. From this perspective, the European Union would be acting irresponsibly by stepping outside its institutional "comfort zone," as this would undermine the balance of the historic partnership between the two sides of the Atlantic.

Such a course of action could, moreover, accentuate the United States' gradual distancing from European security, providing ammunition to those in Washington who advocate for greater disengagement from the continent. These critics could then portray the European Union as seeking to free itself from the US role, which would complicate the task of those who support a close transatlantic relationship. As we can see, the debate remains particularly heated.

What European states perceive as a fair contribution to the transatlantic burden-sharing and as an expression of increased responsibility could, paradoxically, be interpreted by Washington as a sign of disengagement. Such a misunderstanding could accelerate the US withdrawal from European defense at a faster pace than Europeans would be able to develop their own political, military, and industrial capabilities.

In conclusion, European states that remain skeptical of the concept of strategic autonomy—Poland in particular—should view it for what it actually is, rather than

[6] Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union, art. 42(7), *Official Journal of the European Union* C 202 (June 7, 2016): 13–46, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/teu_2016/oj/eng; North Atlantic Treaty, art. 5.

for what they fear it might become. It is in their best interest to participate actively in order to shape its definition and implementation, rather than standing on the sidelines and then criticizing its limitations.

Even among its most ardent defenders, the strategic autonomy initiative is in no way intended to weaken the transatlantic relationship. Rather, it is an effort to strengthen Europe's capacity to act responsibly and credibly in the realm of security and defense. Admittedly, the European Union cannot claim to speak on behalf of the entire continent, and the complexity of its institutional architecture makes it difficult for clear leadership on security matters to emerge. Nevertheless, it remains the most natural and legitimate framework for advancing the project of European strategic autonomy.

The potential exists for the EU to play a full role in the sphere of military power, and crisis management structures are in place in Brussels; however, this potential is limited by the need for unanimous agreement, leadership from the major member states, and the mobilization of the necessary resources—with the associated risks—by the governments concerned.

The nuclear issue is key here because, apart from France and the United Kingdom, European countries rely on the US nuclear umbrella through NATO. In March 2026, France proposed implementing an "advanced deterrent" by combining its nuclear capabilities (which will remain under its sovereignty) with those of the United Kingdom and the conventional capabilities of other states, and seven non-nuclear European countries (including Germany, Poland and Belgium) have declared themselves ready to join such a scheme.[7] This may be the starting point for an autonomous European defense capability that would complement the protection provided by the North Atlantic Alliance.

The EU could only establish itself as a major power on the world stage if it were able to ensure its own security independently—through its capabilities, organization, resolve, diplomacy and alliances. At present, not all the conditions are in place for the EU to transform itself into a Westphalian great power, speaking on an equal footing with the world's other great powers. Rising to the challenge of European power means accepting the constraints that come with it.

As journalist Fareed Zakaria rightly observed, "Europe is the place where the end of the *Pax Americana* poses the most significant security challenge."[8] This observation underscores the urgency of embracing a genuine ambition to be a major

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[7] Emmanuel Macron, "Speech by the President of the Republic on France's Nuclear Deterrence," Île Longue, March 2, 2026, Élysée, https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2026/03/02/visit-to-the-ile-longue-operational-base.

[8] Fareed Zakaria, "We Are Witnessing the End of the 'Pax Americana.' Russia, Which Has the World's Largest Nuclear Arsenal, Is Challenging America Head-On," interview by Marc-Olivier Bherer, *Le Monde*, May 2, 2022, in French: [Fareed Zakaria, "*Nous assistons à la fin de la 'pax americana'. La Russie, qui dispose du plus grand arsenal nucléaire au monde, défie l'Amérique de manière frontale*," propos recueillis par Marc-Olivier Bherer, *Le Monde*, 2 mai 2022], https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2022/05/02/guerre-en-ukraine-nous-avons-quitte-l-ancien-monde-dans-lequel-l-economie-a-pendant-trente-ans-domine-le-politique_6124404_3232.html. Translated from French.

power, grounded in an autonomous, credible, and coherent defense. This, in essence, is the core challenge of European strategic autonomy: it is more imperative today than ever before.

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The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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