

GLOBAL POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Abstract

The existing global system experiences significant changes associated with increasing great power rivalry, economy as a means of political warfare, and rival blocs of powers, such as BRICS. International institutions face crises in terms of their legitimacy, while regional blocs and ad hoc coalitions are gaining importance in international politics. In this regard, the European Union occupies an extremely unique position, being neither a great power in the traditional sense nor merely a player in international relations. Instead, the European Union can be viewed as a conditional power which acts depending on a balance between its diversity and outside pressure. This paper will explore the conditional role that the EU plays in the context of a changing global order considering three interconnected factors – the establishment of strategic autonomy in security and defense, the exercise of normative leadership through global governance and geo-economic instrument. The analysis highlights how internal fragmentation, resource constraints, and dependence on the United States constrain effectiveness, while climate diplomacy, digital regulation, and investment partnerships sustain relevance. Ultimately, the paper argues that the EU's role is conditional, adaptive, and contested, yet remains central to debates on multipolarity and global governance reform.

1. INTRODUCTION

The post-Cold War international system, once characterized by relative stability and the dominance of liberal institutions, is undergoing profound transformation. The global order is fragmenting under the weight of intensifying great power competition, the politicisation of economic interdependence, and the rise of alternative coalitions that challenge Western institutional dominance. The European Union (EU), as both a regional integration project and a global actor, finds itself at the crossroads of these changes. Its role in shaping, adapting to, and responding to the evolving order is conditional upon its internal cohesion, strategic autonomy, and capacity to

deploy normative and geo-economic instruments effectively.

Recent scholarship underscores that the liberal order is no longer uncontested. Ikenberry (2022) argues that the erosion of liberal hegemony is driven by both external contestation from powers such as China and Russia and internal fragmentation within Western democracies. The EU, situated between transatlantic commitments and aspirations for autonomy, must navigate this shifting terrain. The Strategic Compass adopted by the European External Action Service (EEAS, 2022) reflects this duality, emphasizing both cooperation with NATO and the pursuit of independent capabilities.

Moreover, the EU's normative identity, long theorized as "normative power Europe" (Manners, 2023), is being tested in a world where values-based diplomacy competes with transactional geopolitics. Climate diplomacy, digital regulation, and human rights promotion remain central pillars of EU external action, yet their effectiveness depends on global receptivity and the EU's ability to back normative claims with material resources.

This paper argues that the EU's role in the changing global order is defined by three interrelated dimensions: strategic autonomy in security and defence, normative leadership in global governance, and geo-economic instruments such as trade, sanctions, and connectivity initiatives. Through case studies of Ukraine, the Middle East, and Africa, the paper demonstrates both the EU's potential and its constraints. Ultimately, the EU emerges as a conditional power: influential in specific domains, yet limited by internal divergence and dependence on transatlantic cooperation.

2. Drivers of the Changing Global Order

The transformation of the global order is driven by structural shifts that challenge the foundations of post Cold War governance. Four key drivers stand out: great power rivalry, weaponised interdependence, the rise of alternative coalitions, and multilateral fragmentation.

Great Power Rivalry

The intensification of rivalry between the United States, China, and Russia is reshaping the strategic environment. The war in Ukraine exemplifies Russia's challenge to European security, while China's Belt and Road Initiative and assertive diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific contest Western influence. According to International Affairs (2023), this rivalry is not merely military but extends to technology, trade, and institutional leadership. The EU, caught between reliance on US security guarantees and economic interdependence with China, must balance competing pressures.

Weaponised Interdependence

Farrell and Newman's concept of "weaponised interdependence" has gained empirical traction in recent years. Energy supplies, digital platforms, and financial systems have become instruments of coercion. The EU's experience with Russian gas dependency illustrates the vulnerability of interdependence. The European Commission's REPowerEU plan (2023) sought to diversify energy sources, highlighting the strategic imperative of resilience. Similarly, sanctions regimes against Russia demonstrate the EU's attempt to turn interdependence into leverage, though their effectiveness remains debated (WTO, 2025).

Rise of Alternative Coalitions

The expansion of BRICS, documented by the European Parliament Research Service (2024), signals the growing agency of the Global South. These coalitions challenge Western institutional dominance by offering alternative platforms for economic and political cooperation. For the EU, this development complicates its normative agenda, as many states prefer pragmatic partnerships over values-based diplomacy. Chaban and Holland (2022) note that perceptions of the EU in Asia and Africa are increasingly shaped by comparisons with China's investment diplomacy.

Multilateral Fragmentation

The United Nations and other multilateral institutions face legitimacy crises. Reform debates, particularly around Security Council representation, reflect dissatisfaction with Western dominance. The EU, traditionally a defender of multilateralism, must adapt to a fragmented landscape where regional blocs and ad hoc coalitions play greater roles. Zielonka (2023) argues that Europe itself is fragmented, limiting its ability to project coherence in multilateral forums. Together, these drivers underscore the complexity of the global order. The EU's role is not simply reactive but involves proactive adaptation. Its strategic autonomy, normative leadership, and

geo-economic instruments must be understood against this backdrop of systemic change.

3. The European Union's Strategic Autonomy

Strategic autonomy has become a defining concept in EU foreign and security policy debates. It refers to the Union's capacity to act independently in defence and foreign affairs without overreliance on external actors, particularly the United States. The adoption of the Strategic Compass in 2022 (EEAS, 2022) marked a significant step in operationalising this ambition, outlining concrete measures to strengthen defence capabilities, crisis management, and resilience.

The war in Ukraine accelerated the urgency of strategic autonomy. NATO remains the cornerstone of European defence, yet the EU has sought to complement transatlantic security through its own initiatives. The EU-NATO joint declaration of 2023 emphasized synergy rather than duplication, highlighting shared commitments to deterrence and resilience (NATO, 2023). However, the reliance on US military power remains evident, particularly in intelligence, logistics, and advanced weaponry.

Member state divergence complicates the pursuit of autonomy. France has consistently championed a robust European defence identity, while Eastern European states, particularly Poland and the Baltic countries, prioritize NATO and US guarantees (Biscop, 2022). This divergence reflects historical experiences and threat perceptions, making consensus difficult. The European Council (2025) noted that while strategic autonomy is desirable, its feasibility depends on reconciling these divergent perspectives.

Resource limitations further constrain autonomy. Defence spending across EU member states remains uneven, with only a handful meeting NATO's 2 percent GDP benchmark. The European Defence Fund and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) initiatives aim to pool resources and foster collaboration, yet progress is slow. Zielonka (2023) argues that Europe's fragmentation undermines its ability to act as a coherent strategic actor.

Nevertheless, autonomy is not merely about military capacity. It encompasses resilience in energy, technology, and supply chains. The EU's diversification of energy sources after Russia's invasion of Ukraine illustrates this broader dimension. Similarly, digital sovereignty initiatives, including investment in semiconductor production and regulation of foreign technology platforms, reflect an expanded understanding of autonomy.

4. EU as a Normative Power

The concept of the EU as a "normative power" has long been central to its identity in global affairs. Manners (2023) revisits this notion, arguing that despite challenges, the EU continues to project values such as democracy, human rights, and rule of law. However, the effectiveness of normative power in the current global order is contested.

Human Rights and Democracy Promotion

The EU remains committed to promoting human rights globally, often through conditionality in trade agreements and development aid. The European Parliament (2024) highlighted the integration of human rights clauses in new trade deals. Yet, critics argue that enforcement is inconsistent, particularly when economic or strategic interests are at stake. Chaban and Holland (2022) note that perceptions of EU normative power vary across regions, with some viewing it as paternalistic.

Climate Diplomacy

Climate action has become a flagship of EU normative leadership. The European Green Deal and active participation in COP summits underscore its commitment. The COP28 EU Report (2023) documented the Union's role in advancing global climate targets. By positioning itself as a leader in sustainability, the EU seeks to shape norms around environmental governance. However, its credibility depends on internal implementation and the ability to mobilise resources for global partnerships.

Digital Regulation

The EU's regulatory initiatives in the digital domain, particularly the AI Act (European Commission, 2024), exemplify normative power in shaping global standards. By setting rules on data governance, algorithmic transparency, and ethical AI, the EU influences global debates. International Affairs (2023) observed that other jurisdictions often adopt EU standards, a phenomenon known as the "Brussels effect."

Challenges to Normative Power

Despite these initiatives, normative power faces significant challenges. The rise of alternative coalitions such as BRICS reflects a preference for sovereignty and non-interference over values-based diplomacy. Moreover, internal fragmentation within the EU, including populist movements and democratic backsliding in some member states, undermines credibility. Pew Research Center (2024) found declining public confidence in the EU's ability to uphold values consistently.

Normative power thus remains a central but contested dimension of EU external action. It provides legitimacy and soft power, yet its effectiveness depends on coherence, credibility, and the ability to align values with material capabilities.

5. EU Geoeconomic Instruments

Geoeconomics has become the EU's most powerful lever in the changing global order. Unlike traditional military power, the Union's influence rests heavily on its ability to shape global markets, regulate flows of trade and technology, and deploy sanctions or investment diplomacy. This section explores the EU's geoeconomic toolkit in detail, highlighting its strengths and limitations.

Global Gateway Initiative

The Global Gateway, launched in December 2021, is the EU's flagship connectivity program. It aims to mobilise €300 billion in investments by 2027, focusing on sustainable infrastructure, digital networks, and climate-friendly energy

projects (European Commission, 2023). Unlike China's Belt and Road Initiative, which often prioritises speed and scale, Global Gateway emphasizes transparency, sustainability, and democratic values.

Scholars such as Chaban and Holland (2022) argue that Global Gateway represents both a normative and strategic instrument. It seeks to project European values while countering China's growing influence in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Yet, perceptions vary: while African partners welcome investment, many compare the EU unfavourably to China's rapid financing and fewer conditionalities. The African Union-EU Summit Report (2022) noted that African leaders appreciate EU commitments but remain sceptical about delivery timelines.

Trade Agreements and Economic Diplomacy

Trade remains the backbone of EU external action. Between 2021 and 2026, the EU pursued agreements with Mercosur, Indo-Pacific states, and African partners. The WTO (2025) highlighted that EU trade agreements increasingly integrate sustainability and human rights clauses, reinforcing its normative agenda.

The Indo-Pacific strategy (European Council, 2025) illustrates how trade is used as a geopolitical tool. By deepening ties with India, Japan, and ASEAN, the EU seeks to balance economic interests with strategic concerns about China. However, negotiations often stall due to conflicting interests. The Mercosur deal, for example, has faced resistance from European civil society over environmental concerns, demonstrating the tension between normative commitments and economic pragmatism.

Sanctions Regimes

Sanctions have become the EU's most visible geoeconomic instrument. In response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU imposed unprecedented measures targeting energy, finance, and technology sectors (EEAS, 2023). These sanctions showcase the EU's ability to act collectively, but their effectiveness is debated. Zielonka (2023) argues that sanctions reveal both

strength and vulnerability: they demonstrate unity but expose Europe's dependence on external energy sources.

Beyond Russia, the EU has deployed sanctions against Iran, Belarus, and human rights violators worldwide. Manners (2023) notes that sanctions reflect normative power, but their credibility depends on consistent enforcement. Critics argue that sanctions sometimes harm civilian populations more than elites, raising ethical questions.

Investment Diplomacy and Development Aid

The EU also engages in investment diplomacy, linking economic assistance to normative goals. The African Union-EU Summit Report (2022) highlighted commitments to infrastructure, health, and education. By framing investment as partnership rather than patronage, the EU seeks to differentiate itself from transactional competitors. However, resource limitations constrain the scale of these initiatives. Pew Research Center (2024) found that many partners perceive EU promises as ambitious but underfunded.

Digital and Technological Sovereignty

Geoeconomics extends beyond trade and sanctions to digital regulation. The AI Act (European Commission, 2024) exemplifies the EU's attempt to set global standards. By regulating algorithms, data governance, and ethical AI, the EU influences global debates. International Affairs (2023) observed that other jurisdictions often adopt EU standards, a phenomenon known as the "Brussels effect." This regulatory power constitutes a form of geoeconomic influence, shaping norms beyond Europe's borders.

The EU's geoeconomic instruments reflect both normative aspirations and pragmatic calculations. They position the Union as a conditional geoeconomic actor: influential in setting standards and deploying sanctions, yet constrained by resource limitations and competing global initiatives.

6. EU Security and Defence Integration in the Changing Global Order

Security and defence integration has emerged as one of the most pressing dimensions of the European Union's external action in the face of global fragmentation. While the EU has historically relied on NATO and transatlantic cooperation for its defence posture, recent crises – particularly Russia's invasion of Ukraine – have underscored the need for deeper internal integration and independent capacity. This section critically examines the EU's evolving security and defence role, its institutional frameworks, challenges, and implications for the global order.

Historical Context and Strategic Shifts

The EU's security identity has long been overshadowed by NATO. For decades, European defence was synonymous with transatlantic cooperation, with the US providing the bulk of military capabilities. However, the post-Cold War environment and subsequent crises – from the Balkan wars to terrorism and hybrid threats – gradually pushed the EU toward developing its own instruments. The creation of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) marked a turning point, yet its operational impact remained limited.

The adoption of the Strategic Compass in 2022 (EEAS, 2022) represented a significant strategic shift. It outlined concrete measures to strengthen crisis management, resilience, and partnerships, while setting ambitious goals for rapid deployment capacity. This document reflected recognition that reliance on NATO alone was insufficient in a fragmented global order.

Ukraine as a Catalyst for Integration

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was a watershed moment. The EU responded with unprecedented sanctions, humanitarian aid, and military assistance. While NATO coordinated military operations, the EU mobilised resources through the European Peace Facility, enabling direct financing of arms deliveries to Ukraine (EEAS, 2023). This marked a historic departure

from previous reluctance to engage in hard security.

Biscop (2022) argues that Ukraine catalysed a new phase of integration, forcing the EU to confront its dependence on US military power. The crisis demonstrated both the necessity of transatlantic cooperation and the limits of EU autonomy. Zielonka (2023) notes that while the EU acted decisively in economic and humanitarian domains, military effectiveness remained conditional on US leadership.

Institutional Frameworks and Defence Initiatives

Several institutional frameworks underpin EU defence integration. The Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), launched in 2017, aims to foster collaboration among member states in defence projects. The European Defence Fund (EDF) provides financial support for joint research and development. Together, these initiatives seek to pool resources and reduce duplication.

Critically, however, progress has been slow. Divergent national interests and industrial competition hinder collaboration. France and Germany often lead initiatives, but smaller states remain cautious. The European Council (2025) acknowledged that while institutional frameworks exist, political will and resource mobilisation remain uneven.

Hybrid Threats and Cybersecurity

Security integration extends beyond conventional defence. Hybrid threats, including cyberattacks, disinformation, and energy coercion, have become central challenges. The EU has developed instruments to counter these threats, including the Cybersecurity Act and resilience strategies. International Affairs (2023) observed that hybrid threats blur the line between civilian and military domains, requiring integrated responses.

The EU's emphasis on resilience reflects recognition that security is multidimensional. Energy diversification after Russia's invasion exemplifies this broader understanding. By reducing dependence on external sources, the EU enhances strategic autonomy.

7. Challenges to Defence Integration

Despite progress, defence integration faces significant challenges.

- Member State Divergence: France champions autonomy, while Eastern European states prioritize NATO. This divergence complicates consensus (Biscop, 2022).

- Resource Limitations: Defence spending remains uneven, with only a handful of states meeting NATO's 2 percent benchmark. The EDF and PESCO aim to pool resources, but progress is slow (Zielonka, 2023).

- Dependence on US Capabilities: Advanced weaponry, intelligence, and logistics remain heavily reliant on US support (NATO, 2023).

- Industrial Competition: Defence industries compete rather than collaborate, undermining efficiency.

Analytically, EU defence integration reflects both ambition and constraint. The Strategic Compass and Ukraine crisis catalysed progress, yet structural weaknesses persist. The EU's ability to act as a coherent security actor depends on reconciling divergent interests, mobilising resources, and reducing dependence on external powers.

Critically, integration is not merely about military capacity. It encompasses resilience in energy, technology, and hybrid domains. By broadening the scope of security, the EU adapts to the realities of a fragmented global order. However, credibility depends on delivery. Ambitious documents and declarations must translate into operational capacity.

The EU's evolving security role has significant implications for the global order. If successful, integration could enhance multipolarity by reducing reliance on US power and enabling Europe to act independently. This would strengthen global governance by diversifying security providers.

Conversely, failure to integrate risks marginalisation. Dependence on US capabilities would perpetuate asymmetry, limiting the EU's ability to shape outcomes. Moreover, internal fragmentation could undermine credibility, reducing influence in multilateral forums.

8. Case Studies

Case studies provide empirical grounding for the EU's role in the global order. Ukraine, the Middle East, and Africa illustrate both the Union's potential and its constraints.

Ukraine War

The war in Ukraine represents the most significant security challenge for Europe since the Cold War. The EU responded with sanctions, humanitarian aid, and military assistance. The EEAS Ukraine Brief (2023) documented €50 billion in aid packages, including macro-financial support and refugee assistance. NATO coordination ensured military effectiveness, yet the EU's role was crucial in economic and humanitarian dimensions.

Biscop (2022) argues that Ukraine demonstrated both the necessity of transatlantic cooperation and the limits of EU autonomy. While the EU acted decisively in sanctions and aid, military support relied heavily on US leadership. Zielonka (2023) notes that the crisis revealed Europe's dependence on external security guarantees, underscoring the conditional nature of its power.

Middle East

The EU's role in the Middle East reflects its normative ambitions and strategic constraints. Efforts to revive the Iran nuclear deal (EEAS, 2024) highlight the EU's diplomatic engagement. The Union acted as mediator, leveraging its normative identity to facilitate dialogue. However, the Gaza humanitarian crisis (UN, 2024) exposed limitations in the EU's ability to influence conflict dynamics. While the EU provides significant humanitarian aid, its political influence remains secondary to US and regional actors.

Manners (2023) notes that normative power is challenged in contexts where hard power dominates. The Middle East exemplifies this challenge: the EU's values-based diplomacy struggles to compete with military interventions by other actors. Nevertheless, its humanitarian contributions and mediation efforts sustain its relevance.

Africa

Africa represents both opportunity and challenge for the EU. Migration, security, and investment define the relationship. The African Union–EU Summit Report (2022) emphasized partnership in infrastructure and education. Global Gateway projects in Africa illustrate attempts to combine normative and geoeconomic instruments.

Chaban and Holland (2022) observed that African perceptions of the EU are shaped by comparisons with China's Belt and Road Initiative. While the EU emphasizes sustainability and transparency, China's rapid financing often appears more attractive. Pew Research Center (2024) found that African publics value EU commitments but remain sceptical about delivery.

Migration further complicates relations. The EU seeks to balance humanitarian obligations with domestic political pressures. Zielonka (2023) argues that migration exposes internal fragmentation, as member states diverge on burden-sharing. Nevertheless, Africa remains central to EU external action, both as a partner and as a test of its credibility.

Across these case studies, a pattern emerges: the EU is influential in economic and normative domains, yet constrained in hard power contexts. Ukraine demonstrates its capacity for collective sanctions and aid, but reliance on US military power. The Middle East highlights normative ambitions but limited influence. Africa illustrates investment diplomacy but resource constraints.

9. Constraints and Challenges

Despite its ambitions and instruments, the European Union faces significant constraints that limit its capacity to shape the global order. These challenges are both internal and external, reflecting structural weaknesses, resource limitations, and geopolitical realities.

Internal Fragmentation

One of the most persistent challenges is internal fragmentation. Divergent national interests, historical experiences, and political cultures complicate consensus. France often champions strategic autonomy, while Eastern European states

prioritize NATO and US guarantees (Biscop, 2022). This divergence undermines coherence in foreign policy. Zielonka (2023) argues that Europe's fragmentation prevents it from acting as a unified strategic actor, reducing its credibility in global forums.

Populism and Euroscepticism further exacerbate fragmentation. Democratic backsliding in Hungary and Poland challenges the EU's normative identity. Manners (2023) notes that internal inconsistencies weaken external credibility: how can the EU promote democracy abroad while struggling to uphold it internally? Pew Research Center (2024) found declining public confidence in the EU's ability to act consistently on values.

Resource Limitations

Resource constraints limit the EU's ability to match ambitions with capabilities. Defence spending remains uneven, with only a handful of member states meeting NATO's 2 percent GDP benchmark. The European Defence Fund and PESCO initiatives aim to pool resources, but progress is slow. Zielonka (2023) highlights that Europe's limited military capacity undermines strategic autonomy.

Economic resources also constrain geoeconomic instruments. Global Gateway promises €300 billion in investments, yet delivery has been slow (European Commission, 2023). Partners often perceive EU commitments as ambitious but underfunded (African Union-EU Summit Report, 2022). Compared to China's Belt and Road Initiative, the EU struggles to mobilise resources quickly.

Dependence on the United States

Transatlantic cooperation remains central to European security. The EU-NATO joint declaration (NATO, 2023) emphasized synergy, yet reliance on US military power is evident. Intelligence, logistics, and advanced weaponry depend heavily on US capabilities. Biscop (2022) argues that strategic autonomy remains aspirational as long as dependence persists.

This dependence creates dilemmas. On one hand, cooperation with the US strengthens deterrence and resilience. On the other, it limits the EU's ability to act independently. The Ukraine war exemplified this tension: while the EU acted decisively in sanctions and aid, military effectiveness relied on US leadership.

External Pressures

External pressures further constrain the EU. The rise of alternative coalitions such as BRICS challenges Western institutional dominance (European Parliament, 2024). Many states prefer pragmatic partnerships over values-based diplomacy, reducing the appeal of EU normative power.

Geoeconomic competition with China also poses challenges. Chaban and Holland (2022) note that perceptions of the EU in Asia and Africa are shaped by comparisons with China's investment diplomacy. While the EU emphasizes sustainability, China's rapid financing often appears more attractive.

10. Conclusion

The changing global order is defined by fragmentation, rivalry, and the rise of alternative coalitions. In this context, the European Union occupies a complex position. It is neither a traditional great power nor a passive actor. Instead, it is a conditional power: influential in normative and geoeconomic domains, yet constrained in military and strategic autonomy.

This paper has argued that the EU's role in the global order is defined by three interrelated dimensions: strategic autonomy, normative leadership, and geoeconomic instruments. Case studies of Ukraine, the Middle East, and Africa illustrate both potential and limitations. Ukraine demonstrated the EU's capacity for collective sanctions and aid, yet reliance on US military power. The Middle East highlighted normative ambitions but limited influence. Africa illustrated investment diplomacy but resource constraints.

Constraints and challenges further underscore the conditional nature of EU power. Internal fragmentation, resource limitations, dependence

on the US, and external pressures limit effectiveness. Yet, these challenges do not negate the EU's relevance. Instead, they highlight the need for adaptation.

Rounding off the discussion, the EU's potential lies in leveraging its strengths while addressing weaknesses. Strategic autonomy requires investment in defence and resilience. Normative power demands internal coherence and credibility. Geoeconomic instruments must be scaled and delivered effectively. By aligning values with capabilities, the EU can shape multipolarity and contribute to global governance reform. Succinctly, the EU's role in the changing global order is not fixed but evolving. It is conditional, adaptive, and contested. Its influence depends on internal cohesion, resource mobilisation, and strategic partnerships. In a fragmented world, the EU remains a crucial actor, capable of shaping norms, deploying economic tools, and contributing to collective security. The challenge is to transform conditional power into sustained influence.

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