

## ON EU VALUES AND THE OPEN STRATEGIC AUTONOMY PARADOX: REVISITING THE EU AS A GLOBAL ACTOR

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### Abstract

*This contribution points to the ‘open strategic autonomy paradox’ that emerges when considering the European Union’s response to the rapid geopolitical shift from the perspective of the EU’s global pursuit of peace, stability and security through a values-based approach in accordance with Articles 3(5) and 21(1) TEU. It is argued that, in the face of the urgency of the problems globally – not least the pressure put on the international rules-based order – there has been surprisingly little reflection on how to treasure and sharpen the soft power tools currently at the EU’s disposal.*

### 1. Introduction

Anno 2025, it is high time to critically and fundamentally reassess the role of the EU as a global actor. Lulled into complacency by the blind trust in the sheer size and attractiveness of its internal market and deafened by the victory cries over the so-called Brussels effect,<sup>1</sup> the wakeup-call is harsh. For one, both the Draghi<sup>2</sup> and Letta<sup>3</sup> Reports spelled out that proactive action is indispensable to help complete the internal market and stay globally competitive. The biggest danger lurking in the shadows, however, has turned out to be the unreliability of our global partners and the wavering support for international law as a stabilizing and guiding factor worldwide.

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1. Anu Bradford, *The Brussels Effect: How the European Union Rules the World* (OUP 2020).

2. Mario Draghi, ‘The future of European competitiveness’ (Draghi Report, September 2024) <[commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-competitiveness/draghi-report\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-competitiveness/draghi-report_en)> (all websites last visited 14 November 2025).

3. Enrico Letta, ‘Much more than a market – Speed, Security, Solidarity. Empowering the Single Market to deliver a sustainable future and prosperity for all EU Citizens’ (Letta Report, April 2024) <[www.consilium.europa.eu/media/ny3j24sm/much-more-than-a-market-report-by-enrico-letta.pdf](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/ny3j24sm/much-more-than-a-market-report-by-enrico-letta.pdf)>.

What role that the EU can and should play in such a rapidly changing world has become one of the knottiest yet most urgent issues. In the quest to forge future EU independence, as a response to both the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the uncertainties surrounding President Trump's US commitment to NATO, attention has mostly turned to – internally – forging an EU Defence Union and – externally – walking a tight rope so as not antagonize the unsteadfast Donald Trump while standing by Ukraine.<sup>4</sup> While this course of action is understandable from a European security perspective, regrettably, there has been too little reflection on what the EU stands for as a global actor and how it could better employ its unique soft power tools.

Instead, the EU is heading full speed ahead towards what can be labelled as the 'open strategic autonomy paradox'. The latter becomes apparent when considering the increased use of EU unilateral measures and incremental sanctions policies from a constitutional law perspective. The EU global pursuit of peace, stability and security through a values-based approach as stipulated in Articles 3(5) and 21(1) TEU seems potentially thwarted, to the extent that opportunities to exert influence through a soft power approach are thereby undermined.

The open strategic autonomy approach at its core combines a degree of *repli sur soi* with an increased external diversification and a focus on 'like-minded' countries. What does that therefore mean for the global ambitions of the EU as a values-based legal order, in particular when we see a worrying extent of democratic backsliding, power politics push out the global rules-based system and friendly nations turn hostile? Dependencies are increasingly weaponized to force the hand of the EU, as illustrated by the recent precarious and controversial US-EU trade and tariff deal.<sup>5</sup> Should open strategic autonomy then be reassessed in line with the current EU Treaty objectives and turned into a more ambitious, longer-term pursuit of 'strategic economic interdependence' as a new proactive approach with truly global reach?

To reinvigorate the latter discussion, I will in turn briefly touch upon on what makes the EU such a unique global actor, why the EU is struggling to dispel the detrimental image of applying double standards and how the EU is itself undermining its trade leverage when promoting its values abroad. The last section offers some reflections on the 'open strategic autonomy

4. In this vein, see for instance Jan Wouters' contribution in this issue.

5. Directorate-General for Trade and Economic Security, 'Joint Statement on a United States-European Union framework on an agreement on reciprocal, fair and balanced trade', (Brussels, 21 August 2025) <[policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/news/joint-statement-united-states-european-union-framework-agreement-reciprocal-fair-and-balanced-trade-2025-08-21\\_en](https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/news/joint-statement-united-states-european-union-framework-agreement-reciprocal-fair-and-balanced-trade-2025-08-21_en)>.

paradox' and the way forward if the EU strives to be a truly global, and not just regional, stabilizing and reliable actor.

## 2. On the EU as a unique global actor

Increasingly, commentators readily confound the EU with a State. This is plainly mistaken.<sup>6</sup> The EU truly is a unique global actor that merits special consideration. Set up as a peace project in the aftermath of World War II, Article 3(1) TEU states that the most prominent objective of the EU is 'to promote peace, its values and the well-being of its peoples'.<sup>7</sup> What sets the EU apart from its Member States as well as other international organizations such as NATO (which is traditionally endowed with military capacity and tasked with securing military deterrence in Europe), is its outspoken soft power method used to secure peace.<sup>8</sup> Although the EU increasingly engages in State affairs and acts as (often sole) interlocutor for third countries and international organizations, it nonetheless remains a special kind of international organization without an equivalent.

Faced with strongly perceived security threats since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, combined with increasing uncertainty surrounding reliable US support for European security in the framework of NATO, understandably, much attention (and budget<sup>9</sup>) currently goes to trying to quickly revamp the EU into a semi-hard power with military defence capacities,<sup>10</sup> for which Article 24 TEU provides an embryonic legal basis. Awaiting such an outcome, the traditional soft power instruments are deftly turned to so as to try to enforce peace on the European continent; in particular, the adoption of incremental EU sanctions packages targeting Russia (and Belarus).

One important lacuna in this whole process is the virtual absence of critical reflection on what constitutes the EU's unique peacekeeping method, the identification of the weak spots thereof and suggestions for improving this soft power method. It submitted that much could be learned

6. See also Samantha Besson's contribution in this issue.

7. This primary objective of the EU has often been forgotten and is apparently even understudied by scholars of International Peace and Conflict Studies. See Harry Anastasiou, 'The EU as a peace building system: deconstructing nationalism in an era of globalization' (2007) 12 *International Journal of Peace Studies* 31.

8. This section draws on Inge Govaere, 'Transformative Impact on the European Union of War (in Ukraine): Existential Conundrums' in Inge Govaere, Sacha Garben and Eleanor Spaventa (eds), *The Impact of War (in Ukraine) on the EU* (Hart Publishing 2025) 13. See that publication for a more detailed assessment and references.

9. See also Stefaan Van den Bogaert's and Vestert Borger's contribution in this issue.

10. In this vein, see Carolyn Moser's contribution in this issue.

from the EU internal peacekeeping method. In intra-EU relations, the uniqueness of the EU peacekeeping method rests on two intertwined and unique features: forging strategic economic interdependence between the EU Member States and respect for a common set of core values (more on this in the next section).

More than just creating economic dependencies by opening up markets and reducing tariffs (which is often associated with the internal market), the 1950 Schuman Declaration underlined the importance of first creating economic ‘inter’ dependence between the former enemies with respect to products that were ‘strategically’ important, especially to the domestic war industry. It clearly spelled out the underlying logic that ‘the solidarity in production (of coal and steel) thus established will make it plain that any war between France and Germany becomes not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible’.<sup>11</sup>

This ‘strategic’ foundation on which to build further economic interdependence to secure peace and stability was largely absent when the EU promoted globalization within the framework of the WTO. Vulnerable economic dependencies were thus created worldwide and managed through respect of international (WTO) rules. Already the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine had painfully illustrated the dependence of the EU and its Member States on third countries, including when it comes to strategic goods such as vaccines, face masks and energy supply, to name just a few.<sup>12</sup> With the breakdown of (USA) support for multilateralism and dwindling respect for international law in favour of nationalism and power politics, those economic (and military) dependencies are now readily weaponized against the EU. Such developments fuel the idea that the EU should become as much as possible (economically) independent or reliant on ‘like-minded’ nations, neither of which seems to be a sound, realistic and long-term perspective.

As argued below, the challenge for the EU if it wants to be a global actor of importance in the rapidly shifting global context rather lies in turning the current ‘economic dependencies’ into true ‘strategic economic interdependencies’ to leverage the EU’s trade potential to its full capacity. Gradually, awareness has arisen that EU trade policy is not only about trade, but equally if not primarily serves the overall objectives of the Treaties. Support for this approach is now expressly found in Article 207(1) TFEU, which states that ‘the common commercial policy shall be conducted in the context of the principles and objectives of the Union’s external action’, making it instrumental to Articles 3(5) TEU and 21(1) TEU, which

11. Schuman Declaration (May 1950) <[european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/history-eu/1945-59/schuman-declaration-may-1950\\_en](https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/history-eu/1945-59/schuman-declaration-may-1950_en)>.

12. See also Daniel Sarmiento’s contribution in this issue.

prominently include promoting peace and EU values abroad as well. The question is thus no longer whether trade should at all be used for non trade-related purposes, but rather ‘how’ this leveraging should best take effect so as to allow the EU to make a decisive global impact.

### 3. On EU values and double standards

Besides the method, also the finality of the EU’s external action merits closer scrutiny. Article 3(5) TEU, echoed in Article 21 TEU, unequivocally states the firm objective for the Union ‘to uphold and promote its values and interests’ in its relations with the wider world, as well as to contribute to peace and security and ‘the strict observance and the development of international law, including respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter’. Those values on which the EU are founded, forcefully labelled by the CJEU as the ‘very identity of the European Union as a common legal order’,<sup>13</sup> are listed in Article 2 TEU and include respect for the rule of law, human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality and human rights. To the outside world and EU citizens, what counts is not so much the skilful drafting of our Treaty provisions and legal interpretation thereof, but how the EU is seen to act in compliance with those legally binding texts. Due attention should thus be paid to avoiding to thwart the credibility of the EU as a reliable global actor, steadfastly promoting liberal democracy and a rules-based global order, thus withstanding the pressure of power politics by a perception of using double standards. This therefore merits close scrutiny and careful action.

It would be mistaken to assume that promoting those values while ensuring the consistency of the EU’s policies and activities necessarily implies a one-size-fits-all approach. To the contrary, I have argued elsewhere that the pursuit of this objective necessarily calls for differentiation between States based on objective criteria, triggering the targeted use of the different instruments available in our legal toolbox. The main problem for the EU currently seems to be that its approach based on so-called ‘principled pragmatism’ lacks a coherent conceptual framework, whereby the Union’s interests often seem to gain the upper hand over its values.<sup>14</sup>

13. Case C-156/21, *Hungary v European Parliament and Council (Financial rule of law conditionality)*, EU:C:2022:97, para 127, where the CJEU pointedly states: ‘The values contained in Article 2 TEU have been identified and are shared by the Member States. They define the very identity of the European Union as a common legal order. Thus, the European Union must be able to defend those values, within the limits of its powers as laid down by the Treaties.’

14. See Inge Govaere, ‘Promoting the Rule of Law in EU External Relations: a Conceptual Framework’ in Allan Rosas, Juha Raitio and Pekka Pohjankoski (eds), *The Rule of Law’s Anatomy in the EU: Foundations and Protections* (Hart Publishing 2023) 189–206.

Not all the countries across the world are functioning democracies, and their number is decreasing from year to year. A most worrying trend shows the democratic model of governance rapidly losing ground in favour of autocracy.<sup>15</sup> In 2024, only 6.6% of the world population still lived in a full democracy,<sup>16</sup> with several EU Member States<sup>17</sup> (including, perhaps, less suspect ones such as France and Belgium) as well as the US already labelled as flawed democracies.<sup>18</sup>

It is no secret that the EU is struggling to adequately address backsliding by its Member States.<sup>19</sup> This, of course, in itself fundamentally weakens its capacity to promote those same values *vis-à-vis* third countries. Added to this, the EU's apparent incapacity to make a hard stance against blatant backsliding on democratic checks and balances and flagrant breaches of international law, including genocide,<sup>20</sup> by countries traditionally labelled as 'like-minded' democracies, inevitably weakens the credibility of the EU's adherence to its own values.

The EU needs to wake up and get a grip on reality. In the face of such a rapid regression of the democratic model with an erosion of its inherent system of checks and balances, it would be nonsensical and counterproductive

15. See, for instance, The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), 'The Global State of Democracy 2025: Democracy on the Move' (11 September 2025) <[www.idea.int/sites/default/files/2025-09/global-state-of-democracy-2025-democracy-on-the-move\\_0.pdf](http://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/2025-09/global-state-of-democracy-2025-democracy-on-the-move_0.pdf)>. The opening phrase of the report reads: 'The findings of the 2025 Global State of Democracy (GSoD) report underscore the current global climate of radical uncertainty, exemplified by political developments in the United States that are shaking long-held assumptions about democratic resilience and multilateralism. The events in the United States are not happening in a vacuum, as global patterns show that democracy around the world continues to weaken.'

16. EUI, 'Democracy Index 2024: What's wrong with representative democracy?' 8 <[www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2024/](http://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2024/)>.

17. See also Lando Kirchmair's contribution in this issue.

18. *ibid.*, 15–21. See 'Table 2 Democracy Index 2024'.

19. See the various contributions in the following books: Rosas and others (n 14); Armin von Bogdandy and others, *Defending Checks and Balances in EU Member States. Taking Stock of Europe's Actions* (Springer 2021).

20. UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, UN Body, 'UN Special Committee finds Israel's warfare methods in Gaza consistent with genocide, including use of starvation as weapon of war' (Press release, 14 November 2024) <[www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/11/un-special-committee-finds-israels-warfare-methods-gaza-consistent-genocide](http://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/11/un-special-committee-finds-israels-warfare-methods-gaza-consistent-genocide)>. On 16 September 2025, the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem and Israel, concluded unequivocally 'that the State of Israel bears responsibility for the failure to prevent genocide, the commission of genocide and the failure to punish genocide against the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip'. See Human Rights Council, Sixtieth session, 'Legal analysis of the conduct of Israel in Gaza pursuant to the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide' (A/HRC/60/CRP.3, 16 September 2025) <[www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session60/advance-version/a-hrc-60-crp-3.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session60/advance-version/a-hrc-60-crp-3.pdf)>.

for the EU, if it aspires to be a global actor, to limit its external reach to the dwindling category of ‘like-minded’ countries. The EU’s ambition as a global actor should simply not be self-limited to an increasingly shrinking part of the globe. Instead, new ways need to be found to allow the EU to restate its objective and capacity to act as a stabilizing factor in an increasingly precarious world.

#### **4. On the open strategic autonomy**

Fuelled in particular by the deeply felt shortages of vaccines and face masks during the Covid-19 pandemic, the EU has responded to new global challenges by reorienting its external focus to provide better economic security to the EU and its Member States. By setting ‘A new strategic agenda for the EU 2019-2024’ in 2019, the European Council declared, under Objective 4, that it would be ‘promoting European interests and values on the global stage’, that ‘in a world of increasing uncertainty, complexity and change, the EU needs to pursue a strategic course of action and increase its capacity to act autonomously to safeguard its interests, uphold its values and way of life, and help shape the global future’.<sup>21</sup> This rapidly turned into the trendy buzzword ‘open strategic autonomy’, which is best captured by the easy two-pronged slogan ‘act together if we can; act alone if we must’.<sup>22</sup>

The key question up for debate here is in function of which criterion the decision should be taken to act alone or not. This is where the EU needs to sharpen its introspection and dare to revisit its course of action.

The initial and laudable focus on providing domestic economic security quickly translated into trying to act alone or, if not, together with friendly or

21. European Council, ‘A new strategic agenda 2019-2024’ (Press release, Brussels, 20 June 2019) <[www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/06/20/a-new-strategic-agenda-2019-2024/](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/06/20/a-new-strategic-agenda-2019-2024/)>. The biggest takeaways are the following statements: ‘In a world of increasing uncertainty, complexity and change, the EU needs to pursue a strategic course of action and increase its capacity to act autonomously to safeguard its interests, uphold its values and way of life, and help shape the global future’; ‘together with global partners sharing our values, the EU will continue to work towards global peace ‘and stability, and to promote democracy and human rights’; ‘relations with strategic partners, including our transatlantic partners, and emerging powers have to be a key component of a robust foreign policy’.

22. See, for instance, European Commission, ‘Europe’s moment: Repair and Prepare for the Next Generation’ COM (2020) 456 final. Here, it is stated that ‘Europe needs to be more resilient to prevent, protect and withstand future shocks. We will always be committed to open and fair trade but must be aware of the need to reduce dependency and strengthen security of supply, notably for things like pharmaceutical ingredients or raw materials’. See also European Commission, ‘Trade Policy Review – An Open, Sustainable and Assertive EU Trade Policy’ COM (2021) 66 final.

like-minded nations that were considered to be reliable.<sup>23</sup> Little or no attention was thereby devoted to trying to reconcile this security and protective ambition with the other ambitions that the EU openly fosters as a global actor.<sup>24</sup> An outspoken security-oriented approach is inherently inward looking towards the short-term needs of the EU and its Member States. In so doing, it puts tremendous strain on what the EU traditionally stands for as a soft power actor globally.

The 2016 EU Global Strategy paper pertinently recalled that ‘our interests and values go hand in hand. We have an interest in promoting our values in the world. At the same time, our fundamental values are embedded in our interests. Peace and security, prosperity, democracy and a rules-based global order are the vital interests underpinning our external action’.<sup>25</sup> In the precarious world of today, even more so than in 2016, one would expect the question of how to maintain global peace, counter democratic backsliding, reinforce a rules-based global order and firmly push back on autocratic bullying to be high on the EU agenda. Instead, scrambling to boost military spending, security and autonomy while in the meanwhile bowing to the best possible bad trade and tariff deal forced on the EU by the USA, is the rather weak image that the EU is projecting. A strategy of keeping a low profile in the short term while gaining sufficient (military) strength could have its merits. But, at the same time, it is a big gamble both for the EU peacekeeping model and its place as a global actor, in particular at times when power politics rapidly redraft the global map.

Considering the urgency of the problems globally, surprisingly little reflection goes to the necessity to also treasure and sharpen the soft power tools currently at the EU’s disposal. The Strategic Agenda 2024–2029 regrettably does not offer major insights in this respect.<sup>26</sup> In response to the geopolitical shift, so far the open

23. See, eg, European Commission, ‘European Economic Security Strategy’ JOIN (2023) 20 final. See also the 2024 package of five initiatives: European Commission, ‘Commission proposes new initiatives to strengthen economic security’ (Press release, Brussels, 24 January 2024).

24. European External Action Service, ‘Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign And Security Policy’ (Brussels, June 2016) <[www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs\\_review\\_web\\_0.pdf](http://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf)>.

25. *ibid.*, 14.

26. European Council, ‘Strategic Agenda 2024-2029’ (Brussels, 27 June 2024) <[www.consilium.europa.eu/media/yxrc05pz/sn02167en24\\_web.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/yxrc05pz/sn02167en24_web.pdf)>. An extract from the section entitled ‘A strong and secure Europe. Ensuring coherent and influential external action’ reads as follows: ‘The world around us has become more confrontational, transactional and uncertain. We will adapt to the ever-evolving circumstances, asserting the European Union’s ambition and role as a strategic global player in the new multipolar geopolitical context. [...] We will closely engage with partners and develop mutually beneficial strategic partnerships

strategic autonomy approach has focused inward by adding more protective unilateral measures to the EU's toolbox<sup>27</sup> such as the Anti-Coercion Instrument<sup>28</sup> and the Foreign Subsidies Regulation.<sup>29</sup> What seems to be lacking is full-on brainstorming on how to better use the important trade leverage of the EU in its relations with third countries, so as to free it from the shackles of potential cross-retaliation as we have witnessed, for instance, in terms of tariffs and security guarantees for Europe.

EU trade policy may be proactively used to support the EU's geopolitical interests.<sup>30</sup> It is publicly stated and endorsed by the CJEU<sup>31</sup> that in order to promote its values, peace and stability in the world, the EU may leverage the broad range of policies and tools that it has at its disposal.<sup>32</sup> In practice, often the EU trade weight and access to the internal market are put in the balance, triggering various instruments in the EU legal toolbox. A positive approach is usually the preferred and more successful course of action, agreed in common with the third country concerned and consisting of hard<sup>33</sup> and soft law<sup>34</sup> instruments. Where this does not suffice, a negative approach consisting of economic, financial, diplomatic and other sanctions may be turned to, or any combination thereof. The hard reality for the EU today – especially in its dealings with the USA and Russia – is that it may no longer suffice to put trade in the balance to get the required results in the same manner as before. EU trade and access to the internal market will always remain key assets for the EU, but recent events are a warning sign that additionally a more strategic plan is called for.

to address shared challenges. We will leverage both internal and external EU policies in the best interests of the Union in a well-coordinated manner.'

27. For a legal assessment of those measures, see Wolfgang Weiß and Cornelia Furculita, *Open Strategic Autonomy in EU Trade Policy: Assessing the Turn to Stronger Enforcement and More Robust Interest Representation* (CUP 2024).

28. Regulation (EU) 2023/2675 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 November 2023 on the protection of the Union and its Member States from economic coercion by third countries [2023] OJ L2023/2675.

29. Regulation (EU) 2022/2560 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 December 2022 on foreign subsidies distorting the internal market [2022] OJ L330, 1–45.

30. See, for instance, European Commission, 'Trade Policy Review – An Open, Sustainable and Assertive Trade Policy' (n 22).

31. See, for instance in relation, to development cooperation Case C-180/20, *Commission v Council (Accord avec l'Arménie)*, EU:C:2021:658, para 49.

32. European Commission, 'EU Action Plan on Human Rights And Democracy 2020-2024' JOIN (2020) 5 final, 4.

33. Such as, for instance, conditionality clauses in agreements and references to respect for other international agreements already concluded.

34. For instance, human rights dialogues with China.

## 5. On the ‘open strategic autonomy paradox’

The full scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022 marked a radical shift from favouring a positive approach to favouring a negative approach, whereby the EU triggered its existing soft power tools in an increasingly hard manner. The EU declares to have adopted ‘massive and unprecedented’<sup>35</sup> sanctions against Russia and continues to hammer on incremental sanctions packages. On 18 July 2025, the 18<sup>th</sup> package of sanctions against Russia was adopted.<sup>36</sup> While this achievement showing European resolve and relative<sup>37</sup> unity was formally welcomed, it nonetheless begs the question of the extent to which the EU’s trade leveraging capacity is effectively and successfully exerted here.

War is still waging stronger than before in Ukraine, with no clear end date in sight. Within the EU, a boomerang effect has occurred, seeing energy and consumer prices rocketing not least due to EU Member States’ (partially ongoing) dependence on Russian energy supplies. Also in terms of global peacekeeping and stabilization effects, the result is largely suboptimal, with many countries not following the EU’s lead on sanctions. Never before, since the existence of the EU, has global division and instability seemed deeper and more unpredictable; probably not even during the Cold War period. Highly problematic for the EU is the finding that, under the Trump administration, the US no longer seems a stable and reliable partner, neither fully guaranteeing European military security in NATO nor wholeheartedly aligning with the EU’s soft power efforts to end the war in favour of Ukraine by enforcing sanctions and putting political pressure on Moscow. Instead of being politically isolated, Russia (contrary to the EU) is seen to maintain treasured political relations at the highest level with both the US and China.<sup>38</sup> So, looking forward, what does this mean for the EU as a global actor?

35. See European Council, ‘EU sanctions against Russia’ (*Explainers*, 23 October 2025) <[www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-russia/](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-russia/)>.

36. For the dedicated webpage, see European Commission, ‘Sanctions adopted following Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine’ <[finance.ec.europa.eu/eu-and-world/sanctions-restrictive-measures/sanctions-adopted-following-russias-military-aggression-against-ukraine\\_en](http://finance.ec.europa.eu/eu-and-world/sanctions-restrictive-measures/sanctions-adopted-following-russias-military-aggression-against-ukraine_en)>.

37. Hungary and Slovakia were opposed to the 18th sanctions package. On the internal difficulties for the EU to be able to act and institutional practice, see Bruno De Witte’s contributions in this issue.

38. Recently, particularly telling events were President Trump rolling out the red carpet for President Putin in Alaska on 15 August 2025 followed by his presence next to China’s President Xi Jinping at the 2025 World War II Commemoration Parade in Beijing on 3 September 2025.

The 2022 shift by the EU from a positive approach to a negative approach towards Russia plainly illustrates the existence of an ‘open strategic autonomy paradox’. The adoption of incremental sanctions packages fully exposed the link between economic dependency on Russia as a result of the previous globalization process and the internal vulnerabilities of the Member States (suffice it to recall the energy supplies). This fuelled the pressing demand for more economic security and independence from Russia, reinforcing the open strategic autonomy strategy. More open ‘strategic autonomy’, where domestic independencies or trade with friendly nations is favoured, effectively reduces the trade dependencies on Russia. But, as a consequence, it logically also negatively impacts any trade leverage that the EU might previously have had. EU sanctions then automatically become less powerful as a soft power leveraging tool if the trade prospect is strongly reduced or totally removed. It thus appears that the pursuit of open strategic autonomy as a reply to global geopolitical challenges paradoxically risks negatively impacting the EU as a soft power and potentially reduces its importance as a global actor.

## 6. On ‘open strategic interdependence’ as a possible way forward

It is thus high time to proactively reassess where we want to position the EU on the shifting global map. The good news is that the EU has great potential and many good cards in its hand. But, as the rules of the global game are rapidly changing from a rules-based global order to power politics, and from multilateralism to nationalism, the EU should also thoroughly think through its strategy as to how it wants to play its hand. The Draghi Report clearly spelled out the dangers of economic and military dependencies being increasingly and unscrupulously used as a geopolitical weapon.<sup>39</sup> The less clear-cut question is how to neutralize such weaponization attempts.

The EU is now tackling the most pressing need to take stock of the EU’s vulnerabilities in terms of raw materials,<sup>40</sup> energy security, strategic products and services (including space and defence). Swift action was taken, as a follow-up to the Draghi Report, *inter alia* with the Competitive Compass<sup>41</sup> in the endeavour to rapidly reduce those dependencies by boosting economic

39. Draghi Report (n 2) 50.

40. Regulation (EU) 2024/1252 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 April 2024 establishing a framework for ensuring a secure and sustainable supply of critical raw materials and amending Regulations (EU) No 168/2013, (EU) 2018/858, (EU) 2018/1724 and (EU) 2019/1020, OJ L2024/1252.

41. European Commission, ‘A Competitiveness Compass for the EU’ COM (2025) 30 final.

growth and diversification. This was urgently needed and can only be applauded. However, considering the above-mentioned ‘open strategic autonomy paradox’, it seems to be a pitfall for the EU as a global actor to look at the issue of economic security in isolation and simply aim for as much independence per sector as possible.

There may be lessons to learn from the internal EU peacekeeping method, which after all brought former opponents of the World War II around the table: forge more ‘strategic interdependence’ to try to stabilize the geopolitical situation globally. It is true that the globalization process sparked by the WTO, opening up markets and creating global economic dependencies, did not prove to be a deterrent to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. One may wonder, though, whether the right conclusion to be drawn from this automatically and necessarily goes in favour of independence and autonomy and turning mainly to friendly nations.

A first pertinent question is whether those economic dependencies were at all reciprocal and considered to be of a strategic nature for both sides, so that each held the other in a firm grip. In the current geopolitical context, it is often the possibility of coercion rather than providing incentives that matters, so the mere prospect of access to the internal market may not in itself hold the same strategic appeal as in the past. This calls for further, deeper reflection on where the strategic assets of the EU really lie from the perspective of third countries.

Secondly, putting the focus on ‘like-minded’ countries in an attempt to provide economic security through diversification seems at first sight appealing and the right thing to do. But, at the same time, it increasingly restricts the EU’s global reach and prevents the EU from leveraging trade to promote liberal democracy precisely where it might be needed most. It also forgoes the blatant reality that the very concept of ‘like-minded’, ‘friendly’ or ‘reliable’ countries has in itself become highly precarious and hazardous.

The EU would do well to heed the opening warning issued in the 1950 Schuman Declaration: ‘World peace cannot be safeguarded without the making of creative efforts proportionate to the dangers which threaten it.’ The core issue that really needs to be addressed, as a matter of priority, is how the EU can brace itself and remain significant as a global actor in a rapidly changing world that otherwise risks spiralling out of the EU’s control.