



# The European Union's Strategic Autonomy: A Case Study of the Iran Nuclear Issue, the Ukraine War, and the Gaza Crisis

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## Abstract

This research seeks to address whether the European Union (EU) has successfully maintained its strategic autonomy in managing key global issues and crises, a critical element in its decision-making process and a fundamental aspect of the institution itself. The study's conceptual framework centers on the notion of the EU's strategic autonomy, which is analyzed through three case studies: Iran's nuclear issue, the war in Ukraine, and the Gaza crisis. The hypothesis posits that the EU's responses to Iran's nuclear program and the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza reveal a deficiency in its strategic autonomy. Iran's nuclear issue, after two decades of extensive negotiations and agreements that ultimately failed, represents a key instance where the EU's inability to assert strategic autonomy is most evident. Moreover, the EU's handling of the Ukraine and Gaza conflicts, marked by inconsistencies in its application of soft power and moral-value-based leadership, has further cast doubt on the Union's strategic autonomy. The research findings, derived from these case studies, suggest that without political coherence and a unified diplomatic and political strategy - critical elements of strategic autonomy - the EU will continue to be perceived as a dependent and subordinate actor. This condition is commonly referred to in the academic literature as a "strategic autonomy deficit" or a "political and military sovereignty deficit." The methodology of this research is descriptive and analytical, utilizing data collected from a range of sources, including books, peer-reviewed journal articles, online databases, and authoritative expert opinions.

**Keywords:** EU, strategic autonomy, Iran nuclear issue, Ukraine war, Gaza crisis.



## Introduction

Iran's nuclear issue, which has been the subject of negotiations for over two decades, illustrates that the European Union (EU), comprising 27 member states, despite having played a significant role in the negotiation process and in reaching agreements, lacks strategic autonomy in its decision-making. This lack of autonomy became particularly apparent following the 2015 nuclear agreement, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and the subsequent withdrawal of the United States from the agreement in 2018. After the U.S. withdrawal and the reimposition of sanctions, especially secondary sanctions against Iran with intervals of 90 and 180 days, the EU announced its intention to preserve the nuclear agreement. However, this commitment was undermined as all European companies subsequently exited the Iranian market. Many analysts of transatlantic relations argue that the mutual interdependence of markets on both sides of the Atlantic, combined with the strategic dominance of the United States within this framework, has resulted in the weaponization of U.S. secondary sanctions. This development further calls into question the EU's strategic autonomy in its decision-making processes.

Moreover, numerous experts and analysts in the field of international relations contend that recent developments particularly the war between Russia and Ukraine, the crisis within the European regional security framework, Israel's extensive military operations in Gaza, the escalating tensions in West Asia and the Red Sea involving the axis of resistance and the coalition of the United States, Israel, and Britain, as well as the deteriorating relations between the United States and China concerning Taiwan - have positioned the global system on the precipice of rapid and unforeseen transformations (Mazur, 2023). In this context, the war in Ukraine and the Gaza crisis have underscored two significant implications for both global order and European regional security. At the regional level, these implications are directly associated with the EU's failure to implement its decisions, which is a crucial aspect of its strategic autonomy. In both Ukraine and the Middle East, the United States has struggled to exert its influence, both militarily and diplomatically; as a result, its interpretation of international norms has diminished in legitimacy among the actors engaged in these emerging crises. Instead, the current evolving world order is characterized by a phenomenon of "regionalization," wherein medium and smaller powers redefine U.S. interpretations of global norms based on their specific regional security interests and

concerns (Devji, 2024). The conceptual framework of this study focuses on the strategic autonomy of the EU, examined through three case studies: the Iranian nuclear issue, the war in Ukraine, and the Gaza crisis. The hypothesis posits that the EU's approach to the Iranian nuclear issue and the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza illustrates a deficiency in its strategic autonomy in decision-making. The findings of this research indicate that, as long as the EU lacks political coherence in establishing a unified diplomatic and political strategy - essential for its strategic autonomy - it will continue to be perceived as a dependent and subordinate actor. This condition is commonly referred to in the literature on the EU as a "strategic autonomy deficit" or a "political and military sovereignty deficit."

## **1. Conceptual Framework: EU's Strategic Autonomy**

### **1-1. Definitions and Concepts of European Strategic Autonomy**

For the EU to function as a legitimate and independent political entity, it requires a degree of autonomy (Vincze, 2019). Strategic autonomy primarily refers to the EU's capacity to autonomously define its interests and priorities, free from external influences. Consequently, this concept has been central to the EU's political discourse since its inception, serving as a key indicator of the institution's identity and its role as a significant actor on the international stage (Ondarza & Overhaus, 2022, p. 2).

Initially, the notion of strategic autonomy was confined to the defense and security policies of the EU, particularly the Common Foreign and Security Policy. However, it has gradually expanded to include other domains such as economic, commercial, industrial, climate, and health policies. Despite this evolution, the issue of the EU's strategic autonomy has garnered heightened attention from European leaders during Donald Trump's presidency, particularly concerning his approaches to the NATO defense budget, the trade war with Europe, and the nuclear issue with Iran.

The Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA) offers a comprehensive definition of strategic autonomy in its research project titled *European Strategic Autonomy in a Geo-Economic World* (Helwig, 2021). In this project, strategic autonomy is defined as "the political, institutional, and material ability of the EU and its member states to manage their interdependence with a third party (country or institution) in order to ensure the welfare of the citizens of the EU" and to "execute self-determined political decisions." These two objectives are indeed fundamental to the legitimacy of the EU as a political institution.

### **1-2. The Evolution of the Concept of EU's Strategic Autonomy**

The strategic autonomy of the EU, primarily understood as relative independence in military and security matters, has been a subject of discourse since the 1990s. In early 1998, the Saint Malo Declaration, signed by the United Kingdom and France, asserted the necessity for the EU to develop an independent military capacity to effectively address military and security crises. In this context, the EU sought to ascertain whether it could achieve relative strategic autonomy in defense matters by enhancing its role as a distinct defense actor or, at the very least, by strengthening the European pillar within NATO (Howorth, 2018). However, the concept of strategic autonomy was first formally articulated in a December 2013 statement by the Council of Foreign Ministers of the EU, which emphasized the necessity of establishing a more robust defense technical and industrial base to enhance “the strategic autonomy of the EU and its ability to act with partners” (European Council, 2013). In this context, strategic autonomy refers to the EU's capacity to operate in the realm of defense and security, either in conjunction with NATO or independently, as necessary (Tocci, 2021).

This concept was proposed in the 2016 *EU Global Strategy (EUGS)*. Within the framework of the EU's security challenges, it underwent several modifications, and practical steps were taken toward establishing an independent defense mechanism, manifested in two institutions: Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF). This period, coinciding with the Trump administration, highlighted the need for unprecedented strategic autonomy, as reflected in the speeches and statements of European officials. In 2017, former German Chancellor Angela Merkel, addressing the growing uncertainty in transatlantic relations, emphasized: “The era in which we can completely rely on others is, to some extent, over, and we Europeans must really take our destiny into our own hands.” Similarly, following the first tense NATO meeting under the Trump administration, European Council President Charles Michel declared that Europe's strategic autonomy was “the number one goal of our generation,” extending beyond defense to include other domains (Helwig, 2020: 5). French President Emmanuel Macron also emphasized in 2017 that the EU's strategic sovereignty should extend beyond security and defense to encompass economic, digital, energy, climate, and immigration issues (Tocci, 2021).

This broad definition of strategic autonomy was adopted by the European Commission in 2019, and EU High Representative Josep

Borrell referred to strategic autonomy as the EU's "language of power," framing it within the so-called "Sinatra Doctrine." By highlighting issues of economic and technological dependence, this doctrine stresses that Europe must forge its own path as a global actor, rather than being squeezed between the competing visions of China and the United States (GK Today, 2021). Consequently, strategic autonomy, initially limited to defense and security, gradually expanded to encompass broader areas such as the economy, technology, and energy, becoming a crucial concept in the EU's role as an active player in the international system (Biscop, 2022). From a political perspective, strategic autonomy is not an absolute goal of complete autonomy, isolation, or rejection of alliances and coalitions. Rather, it is a process of decision-making and policy implementation that allows the EU to act as an independent actor, determining which other actors to collaborate with based on its own priorities and interests (Lippert & et al., 2019).

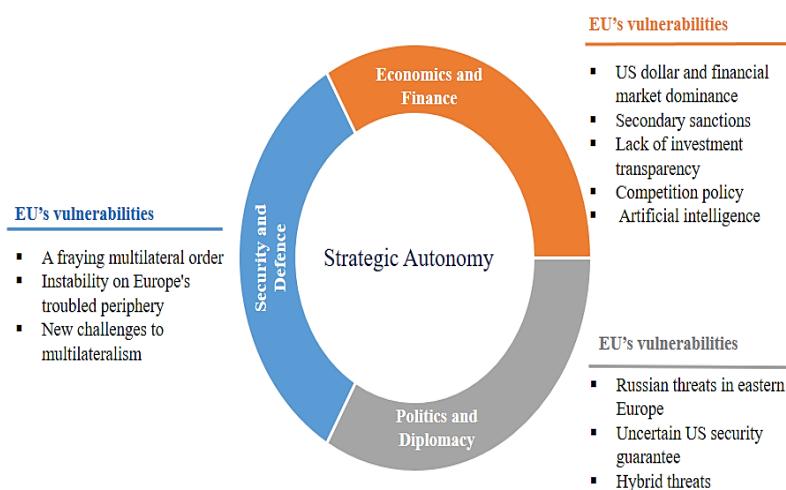
### **1-3. The Scopes of EU's Strategic Autonomy**

The levels of strategic autonomy within the EU can be categorized as follows:

○ **Level 1:** The EU's considerable military and security reliance on the United States has significantly constrained its ability to define its own interests and priorities. This level highlights the geopolitical aspects of the EU's strategic autonomy and has influenced initiatives aimed at establishing an independent European defense mechanism. Practical measures in this area were initiated following the adoption of the EU's Global Strategy in 2016 (Moralls, 2021).

○ **Level 2:** Interdependence is evident in both economic and technological spheres. Within this framework, scholars emphasize the necessity of achieving "European economic sovereignty" to mitigate the influence of dominant economic powers such as China and the United States. This emphasis is driven by the substantial economic dependencies that shape EU policymaking.

○ **Level 3:** Emerging challenges encompass digitization, climate change, public health, and migration. The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, has underscored how disruptions in supply chains and access to medical equipment can reveal the security implications of asymmetric interdependencies (Leonard & et al., 2019).



Source: Data from: (Leonard & et al., 2019), (Fiott, 2021)

**Figure (1): The Scopes of EU's Strategic Autonomy and Its Vulnerabilities**

#### 1-4. Dimensions of EU's Strategic Autonomy

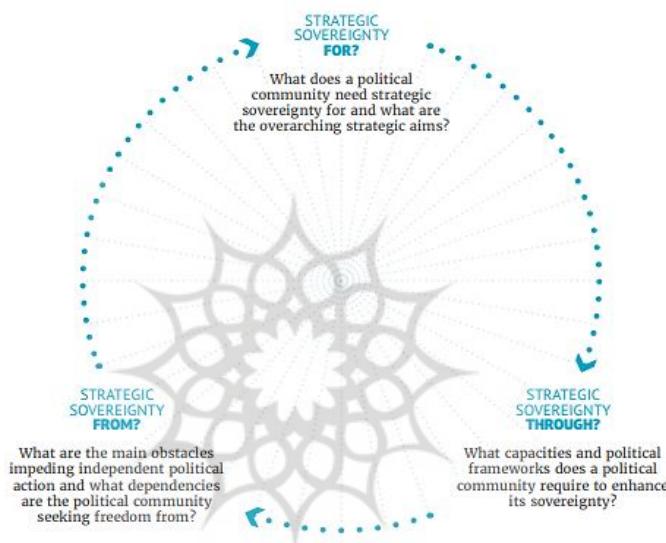
To develop a comprehensive understanding of the concept of strategic autonomy, three fundamental questions must be addressed: What is the purpose of strategic autonomy? What obstacles must be overcome to attain it? How can this objective be realized?

- The Objective of Strategic Autonomy (or Strategic Autonomy For):** This inquiry necessitates an exploration of the reasons a political society requires strategic governance and the overarching strategic goals it aims to achieve (Helwig, 2021). Within this framework, the EU seeks to accomplish specific objectives, such as reducing energy dependencies and establishing an autonomous defense mechanism (Fiott, 2021, p. 2).
- Strategic Autonomy From:** A pivotal question in this context pertains to identifying the primary obstacles to autonomous political activity and the dependencies that the political society seeks to eliminate (Helwig, 2021). In this regard, the EU aims to reduce the influence of particular nations over its autonomous policies and programs. For example, the EU endeavors to achieve strategic autonomy from the United States by decreasing its reliance on China for raw materials and on Russia for energy, defense, and military capabilities (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2022, p. 6).

▪ **Strategic Autonomy Through:** This dimension focuses on the means through which strategic autonomy can be attained, addressing the question of the capacities and political frameworks necessary for a political society to enhance its sovereignty (Helwig, 2021). In this context, the EU strives to realize strategic autonomy by leveraging its capabilities, including common EU policies, budgets, and legislative measures (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2022, p. 6).

#### Strategic sovereignty

Three points of departure



Source: (Fiott, 2021)

**Figure (2): Dimensions of the EU's Strategic Autonomy**

## 2. Explaining the Behavioral Model of the EU within the Framework of Strategic Autonomy

Following the Second World War and throughout the Cold War, the EU, under the concept of strategic autonomy, found itself in a geopolitical (military and security) landscape shaped by the expansionism of the Soviet Union along its eastern borders. Without an independent military force capable of ensuring the continent's security, the EU was drawn into the Cold War arena of two opposing blocs. It relied on NATO's security umbrella, American military bases, and the nuclear deterrence of the United States to maintain order. The absence of independent defense and security

mechanisms left the EU vulnerable to Soviet threats in Eastern Europe, deepening its dependence on U.S. bases and NATO. Despite the EU's institutional efforts to address this security shortfall, it failed to develop an effective independent defense mechanism for several reasons. These included internal divisions among member states, which were split between supporters and opponents of allocating funds for an autonomous European defense system, as well as opposition from the United States and the United Kingdom, who viewed such a system as a potential competitor to NATO. Although the EU has established institutional procedures through PESCO and EDF, it has not yet been able to operate within a framework of strategic autonomy and governance. In the economic realm, more tangible progress has been achieved concerning protection against economic coercion, technological flexibility, and the projection of European economic power beyond the EU. However, in many instances, economic coercion resulting from asymmetric interdependence influences the behavior of the Union (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2022, p. 5). In the context of this strategic deficit, many analysts of international relations view the actions and funds allocated by the EU as insufficient to achieve the defense goals set by the Union. This issue poses the most significant security threat to Europe's regional security order after the Cold War, particularly in light of the possibility of a figure like Trump returning to the White House. Moreover, economic and financial sovereignty is influenced by the transatlantic flow led by the United States. Within this framework, the superiority of the United States in these two areas undermines the foundation for strategic autonomy in the implementation of its decisions. In the economic, financial, and monetary spheres, the dominance of the dollar in international financial markets, coupled with the leverage of secondary sanctions and penalties for violations, has led to the weaponization of economic interdependence across the Atlantic. This dynamic has enabled the United States to exert strict influence over the EU's capacity for autonomous political and economic decision-making, leveraging its superior resources in transatlantic economic relations.

### **3. EU Crisis Management Under the American Security Umbrella**

The United States recognizes that its failure to ensure the security of its traditional allies constitutes a significant threat to its power and influence. Relations with emerging key powers, such as India, as

well as with established U.S. allies in Europe and Asia, are susceptible to the global and regional dynamics highlighted by the crises in Ukraine and the Middle East. This recognition prompted the United States to concentrate its efforts at the Munich Security Conference 2024 on safeguarding the security of its European allies within the framework of NATO.

Recent global developments, particularly the crises in Ukraine and Gaza, have called into question the legitimacy of the U.S.-centric post-World War II international order and have driven the international community to explore alternatives to a military architecture that appears to afford the United States near-arbitrary authority in defining international law. This matter has emerged not only as a focal point for current policy analyses conducted by international relations scholars but also as a central concern for policymakers striving to respond to the escalating crises stemming from this context. In recent months, political leaders in both Europe and the United States have conceded that the complexities of the crises shaping international relations are so swift and intricate that they may only be compared to the developments preceding World War II and the Cold War (Devji, 2024).

In the context of the European regional order, the current situation renders the EU highly vulnerable in two significant respects. First, the economic and commercial interdependencies, particularly the EU's reliance on liquefied natural gas imports from the United States following the Ukraine war, exacerbate the Union's susceptibility to U.S. policy decisions. Second, the EU's military dependence on the United States, coupled with the implications of Donald Trump's tenure from 2016 to 2020, critically influences the Union's capacity to respond to Russian aggression regarding defense and security matters. Given these developments, officials within the EU have articulated their concerns regarding the potential ramifications of a Trump victory in the 2024 elections, highlighting the urgent need to address independent defense capabilities and to allocate 2% of GDP to defense expenditures. This issue has gained prominence to the extent that, following Trump's declaration that NATO does not support countries failing to allocate 2% of GDP to defense, there has been a growing discourse on fortifying European security through the Europeanization of nuclear deterrence. In this regard, the German Minister of Foreign Affairs has proposed the establishment of a mechanism to assign the nuclear deterrence responsibilities of the EU to France and the United Kingdom, the two nuclear-armed states within Europe.

In light of the geopolitical crises and the evolving European regional security order, the upcoming European parliamentary elections in June 2024, characterized by a significant presence of young voters, alongside the EU's apprehensions regarding the rise of extremist parties, are of paramount importance. Additionally, the forthcoming US presidential election in November 2024, particularly the concerns surrounding the potential reelection of Donald Trump, constitutes a pivotal event with significant implications for European economic and security matters (Bassot, 2024).

#### **4. The Strategic Autonomy of the EU in the Context of Iran's Nuclear Program**

Despite the alignment of interests between the EU and the United States concerning the Iranian nuclear issue, secondary sanctions have served as the primary mechanism for the United States to enforce its strategy toward Iran for nearly two decades. These secondary sanctions were institutionalized and solidified during the Obama administration as part of a transatlantic consensus aimed at pressuring Iran to re-engage in negotiations (Schiffer, 2017). However, during the Trump administration, this approach shifted toward a more aggressive economic strategy known as "maximum pressure," which posed significant challenges for the EU, particularly in its efforts to preserve the JCPOA. The EU's vulnerability regarding secondary sanctions stems from its asymmetric interdependence with the U.S. economy, characterized by the extensive scale of U.S. markets and the significant commercial and financial exchanges between EU banks and companies and the United States (Bagheri, 2024, p. 246).

During the Obama administration, secondary sanctions designed to prevent U.S. involvement in conflicts in the Middle East constituted a pivotal element of U.S. foreign policy. In this context, the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) pioneered the contemporary application of secondary sanctions, aiming to avoid military intervention while keeping these sanctions active as a component of foreign policy. This approach enhanced oversight and control over the global financial system. The updating and institutionalization of secondary sanctions, intended to foster consensus among allies and compel Iran to participate in negotiations, proved effective. Within the framework of a transatlantic consensus, the EU's strategy of threatening and sanctioning Iran transformed secondary sanctions into one of the most significant instruments of U.S. foreign policy during Obama's second term (Aghaee & Bagheri, 2021, pp. 545-546).

Although Obama's foreign policy approach - particularly regarding the Iranian nuclear issue - was generally more aligned with that of the EU than during the administration of George W. Bush, the United States continued to exert pressure on Europe to adhere to Washington's sanctions policies (Knudsen, 2020: 4). A notable instance of such pressure was the 2012 restriction on Iranian banks' access to SWIFT, initiated by the U.S. Congress. The secondary sanctions implemented by the Obama administration represented a foreign policy strategy that was largely coordinated with EU policies. Overall, the Obama administration sought to cultivate international support through the EU and the United Nations for extensive sanctions against Iran, with the objective of encouraging Iran to return to the negotiating table (Geranmayeh & Rapnouil, 2019).

In the subsequent phase, Trump's sanctions policy, characterized by a "maximum pressure" approach against Iran, transitioned into its operational stage following the withdrawal from the JCPOA on May 8, 2018. Trump's rationale for this withdrawal was grounded in two primary concerns: "Iran's ballistic missile program" and "Iran's support for proxy wars in the region" (Smith, 2019). The EU perceived the JCPOA as a significant accomplishment of its foreign policy and diplomatic initiatives. Despite considerable efforts to address Trump's concerns through separate agreements contingent upon the preservation of the JCPOA, these endeavors ultimately produced no substantive outcomes.

During the Trump administration, the severity and expansion of secondary sanctions led European governments to seriously consider strategies to navigate or mitigate the impact of these U.S. sanctions for the first time. Following the unsuccessful implementation of blocking laws, the EU introduced various mechanisms, including "SPV," "HSPV," and "INSTEX," aimed at enhancing strategic autonomy and countering the increasingly aggressive U.S. objectives in the application of extraterritorial sanctions. These mechanisms were primarily designed to sustain commercial relations with Iran, particularly in the areas of purchasing Iranian oil and providing humanitarian aid. However, they ultimately proved ineffective due to the reluctance of European banks and companies to engage, driven by concerns over potential repercussions from the United States in the form of secondary sanctions.

Although sanctions have historically served as a crucial instrument of U.S. foreign policy, their scope and scale expanded dramatically during the Trump administration. In addition to primary sanctions targeting specific countries, secondary sanctions

became a significant concern for European nations and companies. Many experts have characterized this development as the "weaponization of secondary sanctions" in the context of U.S.-Iran relations and the EU. Secondary sanctions effectively extend U.S. jurisdiction over sanctions by regulating the global financial system and restricting transactions between third parties and the targeted country. As a result, immediately following the announcement of the 90 and 180-day periods for the re-imposition of sanctions, numerous European companies withdrew from Iran. For instance, the French energy company *Total*, which had substantial investment plans in Iran, canceled a major oil project just eight days after the re-imposition of secondary sanctions, citing the risk of losing dollar funding from international financial institutions (Immenkamp, 2018). Similarly, several other prominent European firms, such as Siemens and Airbus, were compelled to terminate their billion-dollar contracts with Iran. Several factors have contributed to limiting the EU's strategic autonomy concerning Iran, particularly regarding the Iranian nuclear issue. These factors include the "lack of an autonomous European defense mechanism," "dependence on the U.S. security umbrella," "economic interdependencies and the asymmetry of this dependence due to the strategic superiority of the United States," "preferences of groups and companies within the EU, along with their rational behavior patterns, including risk avoidance and cost-benefit analyses stemming from their deep commercial and investment ties with U.S. companies," and "fear of penalties for violating secondary sanctions" (Bagheri & Aghaee, 2023, pp. 29-30).

## **5. Strategic Autonomy and Double Standards of the EU in Ukraine and Gaza**

Since the publication of Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* in 1992, which signified the conclusion of bipolarity and the ascendance of Western liberalism in global politics (Fukuyama, 1992), and Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Reconstruction of the World Order*, which posited that the great power competition characteristic of the Cold War would give way to conflicts driven by cultural and religious identities occurring within and between states, akin to a global civil war (Huntington, 1996), one aspect has remained constant: the Western order, defined by its liberal democratic governance, civilization, and culture, has been predominantly managed by the United States and its allies. Despite the emergence of numerous

global and regional developments that have challenged this order since the onset of the third millennium, recent crises, particularly the Ukraine war and the Gaza crisis, have significantly undermined U.S. management of the regional order in at least two critical areas. The regional security order in Europe, which underpinned the establishment of NATO and the positioning of U.S. military bases across the continent, and the Middle Eastern order, in which the United States was perceived as the sole managing actor following the Persian Gulf wars, have both experienced considerable disruption. As the mission to establish a stable order in the Middle East concluded, U.S. attention has increasingly shifted toward the Indo-Pacific region and China.

Nonetheless, the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, both situated in a region where the United States has sought to impose its preferred order, have highlighted two prevailing hypotheses. First, although the United States retains its status as the most powerful nation globally, it no longer operates within a unipolar framework, particularly in the absence of a fully established multipolar order. Second, the constriction of the Western bloc's political power - while not necessarily undermining its global hegemony - suggests that competition among major or multipolar powers is increasingly less critical. Instead, the influence of middle powers and regional policies has gained greater significance in shaping global trends and developments (Devji and Dalay, 2022).

In the context of regional order in Europe, NATO members reached their zenith with the expansion of American military bases in the region. Concurrently, in West Asia, following U.S. interventions in the Middle East aimed at establishing a new order, the global landscape appeared sufficiently stable for the West to redirect its attention toward China. However, the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, followed closely by the conflict in Gaza less than two years later, indicates that the emerging world order is not primarily defined by great power competition, even in the foreseeable future, but rather by fundamentally divergent perspectives on international politics.

The historical significance of the two aforementioned crises - both regional in nature and indicative of broader challenges to the world order - has profoundly influenced the formation of the contemporary international system, reflecting the narratives posited by Fukuyama and Huntington. In the case of Ukraine, the aftermath of the Second World War and the Cold War exemplifies Fukuyama's concept of the "end of history," providing a framework

for understanding the current conflict. Conversely, the events of September 11 and Huntington's thesis on the clash of civilizations have shaped the post-9/11 order in the Middle East. In this context, the challenge to Fukuyama's narrative becomes evident, particularly given that the United States has not only failed to establish a foundation for a European security order but has also impeded its development over the past five decades. Consequently, the EU, in light of threats articulated during the Trump administration, finds itself in a position of strategic isolation. The security and defense conditions along its eastern borders are jeopardized by one of the world's foremost powers. Despite France's assertion that the EU is moving toward strategic autonomy within a European-centered defense framework and nuclear deterrence, the current critical situation - where the potential fall of Kyiv remains imminent - poses significant obstacles to the realization of such an initiative.

### **5-1. The European Regional Security Order: The Imperative of Unity in the Context of the Ukraine War**

The double standards and disparate approaches of European countries regarding the crises in Ukraine and Gaza have been subject to scrutiny by numerous global actors, including emerging powers, geopolitical rivals, United Nations officials, and even representatives from Western nations. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the European regional security order has experienced a significant crisis. In response to the invasion, European nations implemented "huge and unprecedented" trade and sports sanctions against Russia. Subsequently, during an extensive global lobbying campaign, European leaders characterized their support for Ukraine as a defense of international rules and norms. In stark contrast, many European leaders resisted calls for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and largely refrained from condemning Israel's violations of international law. Following the events of October 7, European nations swiftly suspended or revised financial assistance to Palestinian NGOs, despite the absence of credible evidence indicating fund diversion or support for criminal activities (Lynch, 2024).

From the viewpoint of numerous experts, this issue exemplifies not only another setback in the geopolitical strategic autonomy, as well as the defense and security mechanisms of the EU, but also the institution's failure to adequately ensure regional security. Additionally, it highlights the broader crisis affecting international organizations dedicated to promoting multilateral cooperation,

particularly the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which has experienced significant challenges. The lack of institutional strategic autonomy in defense and security has led many analysts in the field of EU security to regard the prospects for cooperation in European defense as unpromising. Beyond the impediments to the implementation and operationalization of EU defense mechanisms, the absence of mutual engagement and requisite investment in European systems remains a critical concern. Furthermore, reliance on equipment procured from the United States, which is predominantly aligned with the American security and defense architecture, complicates the situation. The internal challenges faced by EU member states are also likely to exert a lasting influence on the long-term functionality and autonomy of the EU (Devji, 2024).

A significant concern is the internal division among EU member states concerning the Ukraine war. Although these states have endeavored to present a unified response to Russia's aggression in Ukraine, various reports and developments within the EU suggest that achieving consensus may become increasingly difficult as the conflict persists. According to the 2023 report from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), certain polls indicate that further military support for Ukraine may exacerbate the existing rifts among EU countries, potentially polarizing European societies and public opinion. This polarization could facilitate the rise of populist parties and substantially undermine political cohesion within Europe (Krastev and Leonard, 2024). From the OSCE's perspective, the outcomes of the recent elections in the Netherlands and Slovakia serve as cautionary indicators for European unity.

Conversely, a significant challenge to European unity is the expansion of the EU, which has been brought to the forefront in the wake of the Ukraine war. With regard to Ukraine and Moldova, there is a lack of consensus among the EU member states concerning the accession negotiations. While Ukraine has been integrated into European political discourse within the framework of the European regional order, the EU regards the implications of this integration as uncertain. Furthermore, for the six Balkan countries that have awaited membership for two decades, there remains no clear path toward their accession.

From the perspective of European leaders, both in terms of military scale and global impact, the war in Ukraine constitutes the most significant international event of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with profound

implications for the international order and, specifically, for European regional security. This conflict is both unique and consequential. In contrast, for the majority of Europeans, the Gaza crisis, while undeniably shocking and distressing, represents yet another episode in a seemingly interminable series of Middle Eastern conflicts that lack direct relevance to their daily lives. Nevertheless, concerns persist regarding the potential spread of the conflict and its repercussions for global trade, particularly in light of the conditions created by the Houthi attacks on maritime shipping in the Red Sea. From a European perspective, the prevailing sentiment suggests that escalation is unlikely, as neither the United States nor Iran - the most influential actors in the region - seek a broader war. This divergence in perspectives likely accounts for the differing positions among European countries that have reached consensus on Ukraine but exhibit varying stances regarding Gaza (Devji, 2024). A report published on the Euroactive website asserts that EU member states are entirely united in their commitment to counter the Russian threat. In this context, they are determined to impede Russia's capacity to continue its military engagement in Ukraine, irrespective of its intentions. While pro-Russian sentiment persists in Europe, it remains a steadfast component of the EU's strategic autonomy. However, perceptions regarding the Gaza crisis and its implications for Europe differ considerably among member states. As one moves further south, sensitivity to the Palestinian issue increases. Additionally, various factors exert significant influence on the political dynamics within individual countries; for instance, Germany maintains a unique historical relationship with Israel, while France is home to the largest Muslim population within the EU.

Conversely, for those European nations that perceive the Gaza crisis as a threat to their interests, the predominant concerns are related to the issues of refugees and terrorism. Although the immediate ramifications of the Gaza crisis on Europe may be limited, it significantly exacerbates the risks associated with terrorism and the refugee crisis. Furthermore, the protracted nature of the conflict increases the likelihood of disruptions to essential energy supplies. While the EU espouses a commitment to playing a more proactive role in the resolution of regional conflicts, the member states, in contrast to the cohesion they have exhibited regarding the situation in Ukraine, each pursue distinct strategies that align with their individual national interests.

## 5-2. The Gaza Crisis: Erosion of Soft Power and the Diminution of European Moral Leadership

One of the most critical issues concerning the EU's stance on the Gaza crisis is the evident failure of moral leadership within the institution. Although the EU, under the leadership of Joseph Borrell, has articulated robust positions regarding Israel's actions in Gaza, an analysis of the approaches taken by individual EU member states reveals a normative failure, thereby exposing ethical deficiencies within the EU (Ahmed, 2024). The vote on the Gaza resolution on October 27, 2023, which resulted in nine votes in favor, three against, and 15 abstentions, has significantly undermined the external credibility of the institution. This issue, arising from the shortcomings and fragmentation of the EU's institutional framework, highlights its ongoing weaknesses as a cohesive actor operating under the principle of strategic autonomy.

Europe's reluctance to uphold international law in the context of Gaza significantly undermines its credibility in advocating for the same principles in Ukraine and other geopolitical contexts. This erosion of credibility challenges one of Europe's fundamental assets: its soft power. A 2023 study conducted by the Council on Foreign Relations of Europe and the University of Oxford asserts that Europe possesses "vast reserves" of soft power, which are derived not only from its relative economic prosperity but also from the social values it embodies. However, the ongoing crisis in Gaza, combined with the inconsistent responses of European leaders in comparison to their positions on the conflict in Ukraine, poses a substantial threat to these reserves. Consequently, Europe faces accusations of complicity in Israel's genocidal actions, which jeopardizes its strategic autonomy.

While several influential European countries, notably France and Germany, successfully cultivated a more favorable image during the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, this strategy has largely faltered in the context of Gaza. A recent survey conducted by the Doha Institute across 17 Arab nations indicated that only 8-10 percent of respondents expressed a positive view of the responses from the British, French, and German governments regarding the situation in Gaza (Mazur, 2023).

The widespread discontent among civil society and global public opinion concerning the West's response to the Gaza situation has significantly undermined the framework of Europe's relations with global civil society, which constitutes a fundamental element of Europe's soft power. The EU stands as the largest global donor to

civil society organizations. From a European perspective, the efforts of these partners in advancing human rights, the rule of law, and democracy are critical to supporting Europe's strategic objectives. However, this European double standard regarding the situations in Gaza and Ukraine has effectively marginalized civil society, which is regarded as a vital conduit for influencing global public opinion within Europe's soft power paradigm. As a result, numerous institutions and non-governmental organizations across the Middle East and Africa have become increasingly disconnected from European nations (Lynch, 2024). In this context, European governments ought to have taken decisive action against Israel's alleged crimes and acts of genocide through established mechanisms such as the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court; nevertheless, they have refrained from pursuing such actions due to prevailing political considerations. Achieving consensus on this issue appears challenging, given the profound divergences both among and within European governments. This dilemma was further exacerbated by the visit of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to Israel, which incited anti-Israel demonstrations in various European cities. Consequently, the statements from EU leaders have become increasingly inconsistent and ambiguous, further intensifying internal divisions within Europe regarding its response to this crisis.

In this context, Federica Mogherini, the former High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security and the current president of the College of Europe, commented on the issue of European double standards, asserting that although it is permissible for the EU to express diverse viewpoints, a cohesive approach to global crises is essential. Former Member of the European Parliament Ana Gomes further criticized the EU's inconsistent stance between Ukraine and Palestine, contending that the Union risks undermining its credibility if it continues to "allow Israel to make a complete joke of international law." At present, there is a notable absence of a moral voice. Additionally, numerous experts argue that European diplomacy has been placed on the defensive regarding the Gaza crisis, resulting in significant damage to its influence in the Middle East. The ongoing war in Gaza has particularly compromised European governments' efforts to garner international support for Ukraine in its struggle for self-defense against Russia. In this regard, Luigi Scazzieri of the European Reform Center observes: "Europe's reluctance to take concrete steps to curb Israel's military operations in Gaza has reinforced the

narrative that the West is guilty of double standards, and that the endeavor to support Ukraine is perceived as a struggle for the future of an international order based on rules, while Europe exhibits little desire to implement those rules" (Norito, 2024).

Secondly, the ongoing conflict raises significant questions regarding the credibility of Europe's "soft and normative power," which is often regarded as a crucial asset for a continent that lacks strategic autonomy in military and security matters. In this context, James Lynch, writing for the European Council on Foreign Relations, asserts that Europe's "soft power" is derived from its economic prosperity and the associated social values. However, he contends that European soft power has been severely compromised by the continent's passive response to the Gaza crisis. Lynch posits that "Europe's soft power in the Arab world may have suffered irreparable damage." European officials appear to have assessed that they can endure this short-term reputational setback, believing that once the violence in Gaza subsides, Europe's stable relations with the Arab world will revert to their previous state. This, however, constitutes a significant miscalculation (Lynch, 2024).

## **6. Europe's Strategic Deficit: Gaps in European approaches**

The EU's shortcomings in addressing the Gaza crisis, alongside its reactionary stance toward the war in Ukraine, highlight the absence of a comprehensive strategic framework. The varied responses of its twenty-seven member states to the Gaza crisis underscored a fragmentation of approaches based on national interests, preventing the EU from formulating a cohesive strategy toward Israel specifically, and the Middle East more broadly. In this context, there is a pressing need for European leaders to develop a new security architecture to ensure the protection of the continent. However, as previously discussed, this initiative faces significant complexities due to the existing security framework under the United States' aegis, primarily through NATO and U.S. military bases in Europe. These challenges have become increasingly pertinent in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Despite the EU's professed commitment to a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, tangible action has been lacking, with this stance remaining largely declaratory. Furthermore, the EU's approach toward Egypt, Tunisia, and Turkey in managing and curbing migration flows into Europe further exemplifies the Union's inability to devise a consistent and unified immigration policy. Although the EU managed to form a fragile alliance in support of

Ukraine, the strategic deficit stemming from its lack of geopolitical autonomy has resulted in the EU, three years into the conflict, still lacking a coherent strategy for its resolution. The Union remains without a clear plan on how to engage with Russia or secure Ukraine's success. Furthermore, the EU has not formulated an effective strategy to address the war's implications for NATO's stability, security, and deterrence within Europe. This strategic shortfall has also affected the EU's autonomous responses to other crises, such as the situation in Gaza (Dempsey, 2024).

According to numerous experts, while Ukraine remains a central issue and a critical factor in the security and stability of Europe, the EU has yet to develop a comprehensive strategy for the continuation of the conflict and Ukraine's success, independent of U.S. support. Central Europe, the Baltic states, and Southeastern European countries, which experienced a punitive Soviet occupation after 1945, recognize that their sovereignty and independence are at risk. This understanding explains their unwavering support for Kyiv, with Hungary being the notable exception. In contrast, Western European states, which enjoyed post-1945 freedom, prosperity, and security under American economic assistance and its security umbrella, have yet to fully revise their stance on Russia. This approach, notably endorsed by segments of German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's Social Democratic Party, is premised on the belief that negotiations with Moscow remain possible, even at the expense of Ukraine's territorial integrity. Such a mindset continues to dominate, posing significant challenges to Europe's pursuit of strategic autonomy.

French President Emmanuel Macron has adjusted his stance towards Ukraine and Russia over the past year. While this shift does not suggest that Macron is leveraging the war to promote his vision of strategic autonomy, from France's perspective, Europe requires a security structure centered around its own interests. In this regard, a resolution for Ukraine is not only conceivable but also crucial in preparing for a future in which the U.S. commitment to Europe's security umbrella may undergo significant transformation. From Germany's perspective, although supporting Ukraine in achieving victory in the war is essential, Russia should remain integrated into Europe's security framework (Bassot, 2024).

A report by Carnegie Europe examines the EU's deficiencies in strategic responses to global crises, raising the question of whether Europe should adopt a more strategic approach in light of these shortcomings. The report argues that the EU has historically favored reactive rather than proactive strategies. The security guarantees

provided by the United States have led many European countries to engage in free-riding behavior, which has substantially undermined the EU's strategic autonomy and capacity for self-reliance (Dempsey, 2024).

### **Conclusion**

Within the framework of autonomy and strategic governance, the EU necessitates a degree of autonomous strategic action and self-foundation to establish itself as a legitimate political entity. To operate effectively within this framework, the EU must manage its interdependence with third parties that influence its policies and actions while implementing fundamental political decisions regarding critical strategic issues. From a political perspective, strategic autonomy does not represent an absolute goal characterized by complete independence, isolation, or the rejection of alliances and coalitions; rather, it signifies a process of decision-making and policy implementation as an autonomous actor. This actor, guided by its priorities and interests, determines with which entities it will engage in partnerships and collaborative efforts to achieve its objectives. In addition to its political dimension, a crucial aspect of the EU's strategic autonomy pertains to geopolitical considerations, particularly its efforts to establish an independent European defense mechanism. This form of strategic autonomy is significantly influenced by a high degree of military-security dependence on the United States, which has largely constrained the EU's capacity to define its interests and priorities. The current research examines the strategic autonomy of the EU through three case studies: the Iranian nuclear issue, the Ukraine war, and the Gaza crisis. The EU's approach to the Iranian nuclear issue, along with its responses to the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, has revealed significant limitations in the strategic autonomy of the EU in its decision-making processes. The Iranian nuclear issue, following two decades of extensive negotiations that ultimately culminated in failure, exemplifies this deficiency. An analysis of the EU's behavior throughout the protracted negotiations concerning Iran's nuclear program indicates that, despite its commitment to preserving agreements with Iran, the institution has experienced challenges in exercising strategic autonomy. This limitation is rooted in the deep, complex, and asymmetric transatlantic dependencies that significantly undermine the EU's strategic autonomy, which tends to emerge primarily when it aligns with the prevailing approaches of the current U.S. administration.

Moreover, the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, along with the EU's responses to these crises, have not only highlighted Europe's double standards in the application of soft power and moral leadership but have also further questioned the strategic autonomy of the Union. In the context of the European regional order, these crises exposed inconsistencies in how Europe addressed two significant events that occurred nearly simultaneously, illustrating the problematic use of soft power and the resultant damage to Europe's moral and value leadership. More critically, this situation unveiled a strategic deficit at a time when the EU needed to make autonomous decisions to restore regional security. In the case of Ukraine, despite the EU's efforts to maintain its military aid alliance, it is evident that without the support of the United States and the security umbrella it provides, the EU lacks the capacity to effectively defend Ukraine and uphold the security order in the European region. This concern is exacerbated by former President Trump's threats to withdraw U.S. support for European defense and security following a potential victory in the 2024 presidential elections. Consequently, the EU now finds itself among European powers, such as France and the United Kingdom, seeking nuclear deterrence capabilities independently of the United States - an objective that appears challenging, particularly given the divisions that have emerged among member states. With respect to the Gaza crisis, despite the unified condemnation of Israel's actions by the High Representative of the EU for Foreign and Security Policy, the vote on the Gaza resolution on October 27, 2023 - where 9 members voted in favor, 3 against, and 15 abstained - significantly undermined the EU's external credibility in global moral leadership and soft power. This issue, stemming from the shortcomings and fragmentation within the EU's institutional framework, illustrates its persistent weaknesses as a cohesive actor under the principle of strategic autonomy.

Overall, the findings of this research indicate that as long as the EU lacks political coherence in formulating a diplomatic and political approach - an essential component for establishing its strategic autonomy - it will continue to be perceived as a dependent and subordinate actor. This situation is commonly referred to in the literature as the "strategic autonomy deficit" or the "political and military sovereignty deficit" of the EU.

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