



The European Union and Strategic Competition

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Abstract: The European Union perceives the world as multipolar, with countries of the Global South expanding their political and economic influence alongside the rivalry between the United States and China. Cooperation, compromise, and multilateral engagement are central to the EU's mode of operation, and the European Union and its member states favor this approach in shaping international relations. However, in a security environment characterized by strategic competition, the European Union, as the world's largest trading bloc, must assert its role. "Strategic interdependence" appears to be the EU's response to addressing the complexities of a changing world.

Keywords: European Union, EU, strategic competition, strategic interdependence, strategic autonomy, multilateral engagement.

Introduction

The international system is subject to power shifts that challenge the liberal international order. "Strategic competition" is the catchphrase in international politics. At its core, and from Washington's perspective, it refers primarily to the contest for military, technological, and geopolitical supremacy between the United States and China since the early 2000s, particularly after 2017, when the Trump Administration adopted a new National Security Strategy.¹ However, other actors like the European Union have a more nuanced view of strategic

¹ The document identifies China as the United States' "strategic competitor." For a thorough analysis of the provenance and usage of the term "strategic competition" in contemporary history, see Stephanie Christine Winkler, "Strategic Competition and US-China Relations: A Conceptual Analysis," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 2023): 333-356, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poad008>.

competition. Instead of reducing global power shifts to a new *bipolar* world order (“Cold War 2.0”) dominated by the United States and China, the European Union and its member states recognize strategic competition as a feature of an emerging *multipolar* world characterized by the increased economic and political influence of middle powers worldwide. Indeed, empirical data shows that a new class of middle powers today has much more agency than they did during the Cold War.²

This article aims to accurately assess the EU’s perception of strategic competition and examine how the European Union defines its future role in the world. To contextualize its potential role, the article briefly analyzes the EU’s interests in relation to other major powers, including the United States, Russia, China, and India. It further explores how the European Union seeks to navigate the opportunities and challenges posed by strategic competition. What are the EU’s capabilities, networks, and policies for influencing strategic competition at both the global and regional levels? And to what end?

The European Union as a Hybrid Actor in International Politics

The European Union is neither a nation-state nor a traditional intergovernmental organization. It possesses characteristics of both, yet it remains distinct. The European Union is *sui generis* – an entity of its own kind. It is “hybrid” in uniquely combining supranational and intergovernmental features with a set of EU institutions operating alongside its member states (MS).

The 2009 Treaty of Lisbon divides competences into three categories: exclusive competences of the European Union, shared competences between the European Union and the Member States (MS), and supporting competences of the European Union.³ These categories also apply to the spectrum of the EU’s foreign

² See Aslı Aydıntaşbaş et al., “Strategic Interdependence: Europe’s New Approach in a World of Middle Powers,” Policy Brief (European Council on Foreign Relations, October 3, 2023), 2, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/strategic-interdependence-europes-new-approach-in-a-world-of-middle-powers/>: “In 1950, the US and its major allies (NATO countries, Australia, and Japan) and the communist world (the Soviet Union, China, and the Eastern Bloc) together accounted for 88 per cent of global GDP. Today, these groups of countries combined account for only 57 per cent of global GDP and are all having to compete with new players in emerging fields of power such as tech and climate.”

³ See Articles 2-6 and Part Five of the “Consolidated Version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union,” *Official Journal of the European Union*, October 26, 2012, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:12012E/TXT:en:PDF>. Articles 23-46 of the “Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union” outline the specific rules governing the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), which are predominantly intergovernmental. In contrast, the Common Commercial Policy, Development Cooperation, Humanitarian Aid, Economic and Financial Cooperation with Third States, Restrictive Measures, and International Agreements involve all EU institutions, including the Council, the Commission, and the Parliament. “Consolidated Version of

and security policy as well as its external relations. The European Union can be a very powerful actor when it has exclusive competence under the treaties, with the European Commission taking the lead. The Lisbon Treaty also endowed the Union with legal personality under international law, enabling it to conclude international treaties and secure a seat in many multilateral organizations.

The EU's ability to act can be equally strong when the EU Commission, European Parliament, and the member states (via the Council of the European Union and the European Council of Heads of State or Government) work in concert or when the member states demonstrate solid political unity. The unified response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine since February 24, 2022 is a case in point. Never before have the European Union and its member states exported weapons to an active warring party,⁴ nor have they agreed upon and imposed sanctions (against Russia) on such a scale. Conversely, the EU's ability to act is very weak when it has only shared or supporting competences and member states are divided. This was clearly evident during the EU's crisis management efforts in the Eastern Mediterranean from 2020 to 2021, for example, when the policies of France and Italy vis-à-vis Turkey nearly contradicted each other.⁵ Similar divisions were also visible with respect to Libya.

The EU's Perception of Strategic Competition and Its Future Role in the World

The history and rationale of European integration are key to understanding the EU's perception of and approach to strategic competition. At its core, the European Union is a peace project; it has never been a great power project. The reconciliation between France and Germany after two World Wars marked the beginning of European integration in the 1950s. Peace and freedom on the European continent have remained the guiding principles of the EU's integration and enlargement efforts to this day.

Strategic Competition in a Multipolar World

The European Union recognizes the growing antagonism between the United States and China. Still, it perceives strategic competition as more complex due

the Treaty on European Union," *Official Journal of the European Union*, October 26, 2012, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A12012M%2FTXT>.

⁴ Since the start of the war and up until April 2024, the EU and its member states combined have provided nearly 35 billion USD in military assistance, including ammunition, air-defense systems, Leopard tanks, and fighter jets. This amount includes an unprecedented 12 billion USD from the European Peace Facility (EPF), in addition to bilateral contributions from the member states. See "EU Assistance to Ukraine (in U.S. Dollars)," *Delegation of the European Union to the United States of America*, September 23, 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/united-states-america/eu-assistance-ukraine-us-dollars_en. Member states contribute to the EPF and get reimbursed by it.

⁵ Katrin Bastian, "The EU in the Eastern Mediterranean – a 'Geopolitical' Actor?" *Orbis* 65, no. 3 (Summer 2021): 483-489, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2021.06.010>.

to the rise of middle powers in the “Global South” that refuse to take sides with any great power.⁶ The European Union explicitly acknowledges the existence of a multipolar world, a perspective shared by many member states in their public statements.⁷

The European Union views itself as being affected by all domains of strategic competition. *Military competition* between great powers is perceived as the most serious threat, given the historical experience of Europeans throughout the 20th century, particularly the arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union. Today, the European continent is severely threatened by a revanchist Russia, which claims that its war of aggression against Ukraine is a reaction to NATO’s expansion eastward.

When it comes to *economic competition*, the European Union is still challenged by global power shifts but finds itself in a much more comfortable position.⁸ The crown jewels of the European Union are its international networks. Currently, “the EU has in place the largest trade network in the world, with over 40 individual agreements with countries and regions.”⁹ However, this degree of interconnectedness comes at a price and exposes vulnerabilities. The simultaneous efforts to reduce Europe’s dependency on Russian gas, phase out other fossil fuels, and achieve climate neutrality by 2050 place significant pressure on European industry. Additionally, this creates new dependencies on China, which is rich in the rare earths necessary for Europe’s Green Deal.

Technological competition—particularly in the field of Artificial Intelligence (AI)—represents the greatest challenge today, as it affects all sectors and poses

⁶ Compare Katrin Bastian et al., “Perspectives on Strategic Competition,” George C. Marshall Center Policy Brief No. 1, November 2024, 3, www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/policy-briefs/perspectives-strategic-competition. For a discussion of the “battle of narratives” in strategic competition, see Frank Hagemann, “Zwischen Mars & Venus. Europa im strategischen Wettbewerb,” *Zeitschrift für Innere Führung*, no. 1 (2024): 34-43, <https://www.bundeswehr.de/resource/blob/5730018/eca72eaa4a496f00b0f473de88c6861b/if-zeitschrift-fuer-innere-fuehrung-01-2024-data.pdf>.

⁷ See “A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence,” European External Action Service, March 24, 2022, 17-23, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-0_en. See also the speech by German chancellor Olaf Scholz at the 78th UN General Assembly, in which he states that multipolarity is not a normative category but rather constitutes the status quo. “Rede von Bundeskanzler Scholz zur 78. Generaldebatte der Generalversammlung der Vereinten Nationen am 19. September 2023,” *Permanent Mission of Germany to the United Nations in New York*, September 19, 2023, <https://new-york-un.diplo.de/un-de/2619364-2619364>. – in German

⁸ The Union has the third-largest share of global GDP, with a projected \$17.8 trillion in 2023, following the U.S. with \$26.9 trillion and China with \$19.4 trillion. Japan (\$4.4 trillion) and India (\$3.7 trillion) rank fourth and fifth. See Pallavi Rao, “Visualizing the \$105 Trillion World Economy in One Chart,” based on sources from IMF Datamapper, and World Economic Outlook 2023, *Visual Capitalist*, August 9, 2023, www.visualcapitalist.com/visualizing-the-105-trillion-world-economy-in-one-chart/.

⁹ “Trade Agreements,” European Commission, Access2Markets, <https://trade.ec.europa.eu/access-to-markets/en/content/trade-agreements-0>.

significant regulatory, governance, and security dilemmas for the European Union. In her 2023 State of the Union Address, EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen quoted a warning from leading AI developers and experts: “Mitigating the risk of extinction from AI should be a global priority alongside other societal-scale risks such as pandemics and nuclear war.”¹⁰ On February 2, 2024, the European Union adopted a provisional Artificial Intelligence Act to ensure that AI systems in the EU market are safe and align with the EU’s fundamental rights and values. It is the first legislation of its kind in the world.¹¹

How Does the EU Define Its Future Role in the World?

When it comes to Europe’s role in global *normative competition*, the European Union is very clear and confident about its values. Virtually no statements or documents on foreign and security policy are issued without EU leaders emphasizing their commitment to democracy, social justice, human rights, and the international rules-based order. In an early and quite remarkable “Declaration on European Identity,” adopted in December 1973, the Heads of State or Government of the nine member states affirmed their determination to integrate the concept of European identity into their common foreign relations.¹² Nearly fifty years later, in March 2022, the European Union reaffirmed its self-perception as a major international actor in the Strategic Compass:

With 27 Member States and 450 million citizens, our Union remains the world’s biggest single market, the most important trade and investment partner for many countries, in particular in our neighbourhood, and the largest source of development assistance. The EU is a norm setter and has been a consistent leader investing in effective multilateral solutions. With our crisis management missions and operations operating on three continents, we have shown that we are ready to take risks for peace and shoulder our share of global security responsibilities.¹³

¹⁰ “2023 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen,” European Commission, September 13, 2023, Strasbourg, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_4426.

¹¹ “Artificial Intelligence Act: Council and Parliament Strike a Deal on the First Rules for AI in the World,” *Press Release*, Council of the European Union, December 9, 2023, www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/12/09/artificial-intelligence-act-council-and-parliament-strike-a-deal-on-the-first-worldwide-rules-for-ai/.

¹² “European unification is not directed against anyone, nor is it inspired by a desire for power. On the contrary, the Nine are convinced that their union will benefit the whole international community since it will constitute an element of equilibrium and a basis for co-operation with all countries, whatever their size, culture or social system.” *Bulletin of the European Communities* 6, no. 12 (Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, December 1973), <https://aei.pitt.edu/57092/1/BUL104.pdf>. “Declaration on European Identity (Copenhagen, 14 December 1973),” *Centre virtuel de la connaissance sur l’Europe (CVCE)*, 118-122, https://www.cvce.eu/obj/declaration_on_european_identity_copenhagen_14_december_1973-en-02798dc9-9c69-4b7d-b2c9-f03a8db7da32.html.

¹³ “A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence,” 14.

Derived from recent EU policies and initiatives on resilience, economic security, and partnership diplomacy, as well as the EU's engagement in security and defense, the following self-image is emerging for the EU's *future role* in the world:

A Stable and Reliable European Union: The European Union continues to view itself as an anchor of stability on the European continent, projecting to international partners the promise of peaceful cooperation and predictability through fair trade agreements and adherence to international law.

A Geopolitical European Union: The European Union and its member states have recognized that strategic competition requires a better understanding of their geopolitical and geo-economic interests. More than any of her predecessors, Commission President von der Leyen links the EU's neighborhood policy, partnership diplomacy, and global initiatives with geopolitical considerations.¹⁴ This approach is exemplified by the EU's Global Gateway project, which aims to offer an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative.

A European Union Engaged in Strategic Interdependence: Rather than *decoupling* its industry from the global economy, the European Union prefers a well-thought-out *de-risking* strategy that does not unravel its international networks but reduces one-sided dependencies on a particular country or resource. Diversifying its partners has become an urgent requirement for the European Union, which explains Brussels' increasing engagement with emerging powers in Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

The (older) concept of "strategic autonomy" originated as an approach to EU security and defense aiming to reduce dependence on the United States. Recently, it has been expanded into the notion of "open strategic autonomy," which describes the EU's willingness to act more strategically in its own interest without sacrificing its international economic network.¹⁵

"Strategic interdependence," a notion proposed by a group of authors from the European Council on Foreign Relations, is described as

a middle way between strategic autonomy—which threatens to divide the EU and alienate the rest of the world—and full alignment with the US in an anti-China bloc. Where strategic autonomy aims "to act autonomously when and where necessary," strategic interdependence acknowledges and emphasises

¹⁴ Nicole Koenig, "The 'geopolitical' European Commission and its pitfalls," Policy Brief, Hertie School, Jacques Delors Centre, 2019, https://www.hertie-school.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Policy_Brief_Nicole_geopolitical_commission.pdf.

¹⁵ See Mario Damen, "EU Strategic Autonomy 2013-2023. From Concept to Capacity," Policy Brief, 2022, European Parliament. Compare also Spain's National Office of Foresight and Strategy: Resilient EU 2030. A future-oriented approach to reinforce the EU's Open Strategic Autonomy and Global Leadership, published for the Spanish EU Presidency, 2023, <https://spanish-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/news/the-spanish-presidency-presents-resilient-eu2030-roadmap-to-boost-european-union-open-strategic-autonomy/>.

the complex reality of our interconnected world. It advocates building resilience to the weaponisation of dependencies whether in the fields of migration, technology, or trade, but pushes back against the idea of decoupling.¹⁶

In practice, (open) strategic autonomy and strategic interdependence need not contradict each other. Their objective is similar: to enhance the EU's external agency and maneuverability by (1) achieving a clearer understanding of its own core interests, values, and mission and (2) acting more pragmatically and strategically in its own interest vis-à-vis the rest of the world. This includes cooperating with partners who do not necessarily share the European mindset.

The European Union as a Security Provider: While the European Union is preparing to take greater responsibility for its security in Europe—such as by increasing investment in its defense sector—it does not appear to be pursuing the concept of *military* strategic autonomy with great vigor. This is largely due to a lack of consensus among member states on relieving the United States of its security guarantees for Europe.¹⁷ The European Union will most likely work towards strengthening the European pillar within NATO, as maintaining good transatlantic relations is considered a *raison d'état* for many EU member states. However, a potentially decreasing U.S. defense commitment to Europe will push the European Union to assume greater responsibility for its own defense.¹⁸

When it comes to crisis management within the framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), the European Union has accumulated extensive knowledge and experience worldwide.¹⁹ A recent study by the Finnish Institute of International Affairs examines EU crisis management in the context of strategic competition. The study highlights how strategic competition complicates the execution of EU crisis management by (1) increasing both the number

¹⁶ Aydıntaşbaş et al., “Strategic Interdependence: Europe’s New Approach in a World of Middle Powers,” 14.

¹⁷ The term “strategic autonomy” is used only once in “A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence,” 23.

¹⁸ In her bid for a second term as EU Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen stated that European security and defense would be a priority in her program, signaling ambitions to further communitarize parts of the CSDP by appointing an EU Commissioner for Defense and working toward a European Defence Union through the systematic pooling of resources and partial transition to a war economy. Barbara Moens, Zia Weise, and Hans von der Burchard, “Von der Leyen’s 2nd-term Pitch: More Military Might, Less Climate Talk,” *Politico*, February 19, 2024, www.politico.eu/article/ursula-von-der-leyen-military-defense-sclimate-second-term/. See also the guest article by Ursula von der Leyen and CDU/CSU opposition leader Friedrich Merz of February 23, 2024, in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*: “Eine echte Verteidigungsunion schaffen,” <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/merz-und-von-der-leyen-zu-ukraine-krieg-eu-sollte-verteidigungsunion-schaffen-19540491.html>. - in German

¹⁹ Since 2003, the European Union has conducted over 37 overseas operations, deploying both civilian and military missions and operations in several countries across Europe, Africa, and Asia. Currently, there are 21 ongoing CSDP missions and operations, 12 of which are civilian and 9 military.

and diversity of actors involved in conflicts, (2) intensifying competition over approaches to conflict management and resolution, and (3) fueling contestation over democratic governance and peacebuilding ideals. In other words, the *normative* dimension of strategic competition, along with the exploitation of conflicts by external state and non-state actors, have rendered EU missions more challenging and complex.²⁰

Combined with internal dynamics that suggest a growing geopolitical orientation, future EU crisis management seems to be characterized by three trends: (a) a geopolitical turn marked by a stronger emphasis on the EU's strategic interests when deciding where to intervene; (b) an increased security-focused orientation ("train and equip")²¹; and (c) the formation of ad hoc mandatory frameworks and coalitions.

Strategic Competition as a Balancing Act: Managing Relations with the United States, Russia, China, and India

This section will briefly outline the EU's strategic relations with the United States, Russia, China, and India. The main challenge for the European Union is managing these relationships in line with its interests while avoiding alienating its most important partner, the United States.

EU – United States

The United States is by far the most important strategic partner of the European Union. Both sides share a long history of cooperation, with NATO serving as the cornerstone of their relationship. U.S. security guarantees to its NATO allies are vital for Europe. From an EU perspective, close EU-NATO cooperation is, therefore, a top priority. Currently, U.S./NATO and EU collaboration remains strong but limited due to the severe tensions between Turkey, a non-EU state, and Cyprus, a non-NATO member. The European Union and NATO coordinate and join forces to support Ukraine. Additionally, the European Union is supporting the U.S.-UK operation in the Red Sea, and in March 2023, the United States and the European Union conducted their first-ever joint naval exercise in the Indo-Pacific.²²

²⁰ Katariina Mustasilta, "The EU's External Conflict Responses: Drivers and Emerging Trends in the Era of Strategic Competition," FIIA Working Paper No. 135, *Finland Institute of International Affairs*, September 2023, especially pp. 9-14, https://www.fiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/wp135_eus-external-conflict-responses.pdf.

²¹ Mustasilta, "The EU's External Conflict Responses," 12: "Despite the development of the integrated approach and more rhetorical emphasis on a holistic approach, research suggests that the EU's engagement in conflict and crisis situations is more and more (not less) security-oriented."

²² On February 19, 2024, EU foreign ministers officially launched the EUNAVFOR ASPIDES mission to safeguard freedom of navigation in response to the Red Sea crisis. See "Security and Freedom of Navigation in the Red Sea: Council Launches EUNAVFOR ASPIDES," Press Release, Council of the European Union, February 19, 2024, www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/02/19/security-and-freedom-of-navi

A key challenge lies in the perception of *strategic competition* itself. The U.S. focus on its rivalry with China clashes with the EU's view of the world as multi-polar. These differing perspectives lead to asymmetric assessments of Russia and China. For the European Union, Russia is considered the biggest threat, while perceptions of China vary by sector. Conversely, for the United States, China is seen as the primary global threat, with Russia viewed mainly as a threat to Europe. The difficulty with these differing assessments is that the European Union and the United States often arrive at divergent conclusions about global threats despite their shared culture, history, and commitment to a rules-based international order.

One example of this is strategic competition in the realm of technology, where the European Union risks being caught between the United States and China. The Biden administration has taken decisive steps to use export controls as a strategic tool vis-à-vis China.²³ In October 2022, the United States began restricting trade in semiconductor technologies with China. By January 2023, Japan and the Netherlands had joined this policy through an agreement with the United States that effectively limits the export of the most advanced microchips and the tools to produce them to China. Other European countries and the European Union as a whole are under pressure to align with the U.S.'s strategic export control policies toward Beijing, complicating efforts to adopt a differentiated approach to China.

EU – Russia

Following the adoption of the Treaty of Amsterdam in May 1999, Russia, of all countries, became the addressee of the EU's first "Common Strategy," a new instrument in the toolbox of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).²⁴ Until Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, there were hopes that EU-Russia relations could develop in a constructive manner. The experience of Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of Donbas in 2014 could and should have served as an eye-opener for all Europeans regarding Moscow's intentions. However, it took the full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022 for Europe to fully grasp Russia's determination to dominate its neighbor and former Soviet republic. In Russia's

gation-in-the-red-sea-council-launches-new-eu-defensive-operation/; "US: First Ever Joint Naval Exercise Conducted Between the EU and U.S.," European Union External Action, March 24, 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/us-first-ever-joint-naval-exercise-conducted-between-eu-and-us_en.

²³ The stated objective of the United States is to "maintain as large a lead as possible" over China in key technologies, particularly in semiconductors, which have dual-use qualities. See Tobias Gehrke and Julian Ringhof, "The Power of Control: How the EU Can Shape the New Era of Strategic Export Restrictions," *Policy Brief*, European Council on Foreign Relations, May 17, 2023, 4, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-power-of-control-how-the-eu-can-shape-the-new-era-of-strategic-export-restrictions/>.

²⁴ Council of the European Union, "1999/414/CFSP: Common Strategy of the European Union of 4 June 1999 on Russia," *EUR-Lex*, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:31999E0414>.

perception, its war against Ukraine is part of a broader, if not global, struggle against the political West aimed at establishing an international order in which the spheres of interests of great powers are respected.²⁵

Today, Europeans understand that Russia will remain the primary threat to their security and territorial integrity for years to come. Given that the European Union is unable to confront Russia without Washington's conventional forces and nuclear security guarantees within NATO, there might come a time when the United States will ask for European solidarity in a potential standoff with China over Taiwan – a scenario for which Europeans are neither materially nor mentally prepared.²⁶

A hard lesson for the European Union to learn is that many middle powers in Asia, Africa, and Latin America do not see a need to fully align themselves with the European response to Russia's war of aggression. While over 130 UN member states have condemned Russia's invasion, many have been unwilling to support the EU's sanctions regime. Therefore, it is not beneficial for Brussels to condition its partnership diplomacy or "strategic interdependence" with countries such as Brazil, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, or South Korea on their proximity to or distance from Moscow.²⁷ This is likely one of the core lessons for the European Union if it wants to act more pragmatically.

EU – China

China is perhaps the partner within the EU's international network with the widest gap between close trade partnership on the one hand and political alienation on the other. The Tiananmen massacre in 1989 served as a wake-up call for the Europeans, making them realize how determined the Communist Party was to preserve its status and China's societal system. Despite the arms embargo against Beijing, which is still in place today, trade relations and Western foreign direct investment in China have flourished. The European Union has watched

²⁵ Russia expert Arkady Moshes describes the EU-Russia relationship as a series of mutual misperceptions. Arkady Moshes, "The Troubled Partnership: The EU and Russia," contribution to the workshop on "Strategic Partnership as an Instrument of EU Foreign Policy," April 13, 2015, hosted by The Centre for European Studies at Carleton University, Canada, 17-19, <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2015/12/Strategic-Partnership-Workshop-Report-final.pdf>.

²⁶ Jana Puglierin and Pawel Zerka, "Keeping America Close, Russia Down, and China Far Away: How Europeans Navigate a Competitive World," *Policy Brief*, European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), June 7, 2023, 18, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/keeping-america-close-russia-down-and-china-far-away-how-europeans-navigate-a-competitive-world/>.

²⁷ See the results of the comprehensive opinion poll conducted for the ECFR's and Oxford University's research project "Europe in a Changing World": Timothy Garton Ash, Ivan Krastev, and Mark Leonard, "Living in an à la carte World: What European Policymakers Should Learn from Global Public Opinion," *Policy Brief*, European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), November 15, 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/living-in-an-a-la-carte-world-what-european-policymakers-should-learn-from-global-public-opinion/>.

China's rise in the Far East with a mixture of fascination and fear. The launch of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, along with the initiation of the 16+1 engagement with Central and Eastern European countries a year earlier—many of which are EU member states—showed Europeans that China had ambitions for a global leadership role. In 2021, China's GDP surpassed that of the European Union for the first time. Today, the United States, China, and the European Union occupy many of the world's "top three" positions, with the European Union typically ranking third after the United States and China.²⁸

The increasing assertiveness of Beijing and mounting tensions between the United States and China prompted the European Union to review its China policy in 2019. Depending on the subject or sector, the European External Action Service developed a doctrine that regarded Beijing as a partner, competitor, or rival.²⁹ Since 2019, President Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party have continued on their path, challenging the West on technological advances, supply chain reliability, the international law of the sea, the status of Taiwan, human rights in Xinjiang, control over Hong Kong, and alternative interpretations of the international order.

To a great extent, the EU's room for maneuver in strategic competition is shaped by the U.S.-China and China-Russia relationships. The rivalry between Washington and Beijing impacted Europe before 2022, but with Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine since February 2022 and given Europe's reliance on U.S. security guarantees, the scope for an individual European China policy has diminished, while the pressure to align with Washington has increased.³⁰ The European Union is also closely monitoring the China-Russia partnership, a "friendship without limits," as Putin and Xi Jinping declared in February 2022, just days before Russia invaded Ukraine.

Open-source data indicates a significant increase in Russian imports of Chinese-manufactured dual-use goods. In response, EU representatives used the latest EU-China Summit in December 2023 to warn China against supplying lethal

²⁸ This applies, for example, to the projected share of global GDP in 2023 and military expenditure in 2022. In terms of the value of global trade in goods and services, the EU ranked first in 2022. Eurostat, "World Trade in Goods and Services – an Overview," *Statistics Explained*, data extracted in July 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=World_trade_in_goods_and_services_-_an_overview.

²⁹ European Commission and HR/VP Contribution to the European Council, "EU-China – A Strategic Outlook," Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council, March 12, 2019, 4, <https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2019-03/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf>.

³⁰ See also Sinikukka Saari, Niklas Helwig, Juha Jokela, and Mikael Mattlin, "EU-China Relations in an Uncertain World: Walking a Geopolitical Tightrope," *FIIA Briefing Paper* no. 376, Finish Institute of International Affairs, November 2023, 6, www.fiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/bp376_eu-china-relations-in-an-uncertain-world.pdf.

weapons to Russia and to demand support in preventing Russia from circumventing sanctions.³¹ However, realizing that Beijing remained unimpressed by this request, the EU's 13th sanctions package on Russia, for the first time, targets Chinese and Indian companies accused of supporting Moscow's war effort.³²

EU – India

As with the United States and China, the European Union is engaged with India in an institutionalized “Strategic Partnership,” a format proposed by the 2003 European Security Strategy. However, there is a consensus in the academic literature that the full potential of this partnership has not yet been fully realized.³³ A “Bilateral Trade and Investment Agreement” between the European Union and India has been on hold since 2013, despite their important trade relations.³⁴ However, negotiations were resumed in June 2022, with plans to be finalized in 2024.

From a strategic perspective, the European Union appears to regard India as its most important partner in shaping its Indo-Pacific strategy. When considered together, the 2018 Strategy on India and the 2021 Strategy on the Indo-Pacific suggest that the European Union offers the region an alternative trajectory to

³¹ “EU-China Summit, 7 December 2023, Main Results,” European Council and Council of the European Union, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2023/12/07/>. Some reports attribute the failure of Ukraine's autumn 2023 counteroffensive to China's constant supply of Russia with vehicles and key components for weapons production. See, for example, Markus Garlauskas, Joseph Webster, and Emma C. Verges, “China's Support for Russia Has Been Hindering Ukraine's Counteroffensive,” Atlantic Council, November 15, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/chinas-support-for-russia-has-been-hindering-ukraines-counteroffensive/>.

³² “EU adopts 13th package of sanctions against Russia after two years of its war of aggression against Ukraine,” *Press Release*, European Commission, February 23, 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_963: “The Council added 27 new entities to the list of those directly supporting Russia's military and industrial complex in its war of aggression against Ukraine. ... Some of these entities are located in third countries (India, Sri Lanka, China, Serbia, Kazakhstan, Thailand, and Turkey) and have been involved in the circumvention of trade restrictions.”

³³ Lucyna Czechowska, “Joint Bodies and the Regularization of Strategic Interaction: A Comparison of the European Union's Strategic Partnerships with Japan and India,” *Journal of Common Market Studies* (JCMS) 60, no. 4 (July 2022): 1144-1164, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13325>.

³⁴ The European Union is India's third-largest trading partner, accounting for € 88 billion in trade in goods in 2021, or 10.8% of India's total trade, following the USA (11.6%) and China (11.4%). India is the EU's 10th-largest trading partner, representing 2.1% of the EU's total trade in goods in 2021, well behind China (16.2%), the USA (14.7%), and the UK (10%). See “India: EU Trade Relations with India. Facts, Figures and Latest Developments,” European Commission, https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/india_en.

the U.S.-China rivalry.³⁵ The EU's interest is to make India an ally in promoting the rules-based international order, effective multilateralism, the protection of human rights, and the achievement of internationally agreed objectives, such as the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the realization of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

In the Indo-Pacific, the European Union must carefully balance its strategic messaging towards three different partners or regions: (1) *vis-à-vis the United States*, the message is that the European Union and its member states are ready to take on a greater share in safeguarding a free, secure, and stable maritime environment in the region, not least as an act of reciprocity for Washington's security role in Europe; (2) *towards China*, the message is that "the EU's approach to the region is one of cooperation, not confrontation," and "inclusive of all partners wishing to cooperate with the EU";³⁶ and (3) *vis-à-vis India, and also ASEAN* (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations), the message is that the European Union shares their perception of the world as multipolar, not bipolar; that their rising power and influence in the region and beyond are recognized; and that they are valued cooperation partners to the European Union, including in a region-to-region format. The litmus test for the EU's new geopolitical pragmatism will be its ability to endure differing perceptions of India and other "Global South" partners regarding Russia's war against Ukraine or the Israel-Gaza conflict.³⁷

³⁵ European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, "The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific," Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, September 16, 2021, www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf.

See also Frederick Kliem, "The EU Strategy on Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: A Meaningful Regional Complement?" Policy Brief, *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung*, January 2021, https://www.kas.de/documents/288143/16920728/Panorama+2021_01+Kliem.pdf.

³⁶ "Questions and Answers: EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific," European Commission, September 16, 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_21_4709.

³⁷ In the UN General Assembly (UNGA) vote on March 2, 2022, on Resolution A/ES-11/L.1, condemning Russia for its invasion of Ukraine, India abstained along with 34 other countries, while all EU member states voted in favor. In another UNGA vote on February 2, 2023, calling for Russia's immediate and unconditional withdrawal from Ukraine, India abstained again – maintaining its neutral stance on Russia's actions. For details, see the UN Digital Library on Voting Data, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/search?ln=en&cc=Voting+Data>. Regarding the voting behavior of the European Union and India on the war in Gaza, both sides demonstrated a relatively high degree of alignment. In the UN General Assembly vote on October 27, 2023, for an immediate humanitarian truce in Gaza to facilitate humanitarian aid, India abstained, as did 15 EU member states. In a subsequent vote on December 12, 2023, on an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza, India voted "yes," alongside 17 EU member states.

EU Responses to Strategic Competition

The previous sections provided an analysis of the EU's perception of strategic competition and its role within it, as well as an outline of Brussels' interests vis-à-vis other major powers. This final section discusses the EU's policy responses to strategic competition, which can be divided into four categories: EU Enlargement, EU Neighborhood Policy, EU partnership diplomacy, and measures to secure the EU's economic-industrial base. A fifth category, which is beyond the scope of this article, is the EU's role in the governance of global commons – such as climate and environmental policies, maritime security, space security, and the EU's capacity for setting norms and standards in these sectors.

EU Enlargement

Sometimes overlooked as a geopolitical instrument in its own right, EU enlargement can be seen as the most forceful expression of the Union's strategic intent. Overall, and from a historical perspective, the accession of new member states has proven to be a success story, contributing to stabilization, economic development, and opportunities for younger generations. The various enlargement rounds, especially the one leading to the accession of ten new Eastern and Central European members in 2004, have demonstrated the staying power of the EU Commission once negotiations have begun. The strategic dimension of enlargement is currently gaining momentum, with nine accession candidates on the EU's agenda. The Western Balkan countries—Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia—are each progressing at their own pace.³⁸ Negotiations with Turkey, ongoing since 2005, have effectively stalled due to Ankara's autocratic turn in 2016 and allegations of human rights violations. Meanwhile, the European Union has recognized that the longer the accession process takes, the more influence other actors, such as Russia and China, can gain in the region.

The newest official EU candidates are Ukraine and Moldova (June 2022), later joined by Georgia (December 2023), demonstrating the Union's resolve not to be deterred by an ongoing war and geopolitical tensions with Russia. In fact, this decision straightforwardly rejected the idea of a Russian sphere of influence in the EU's Eastern neighborhood. In December 2023, the European Council agreed to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova.

EU Neighborhood Policy (ENP)

With the invitation for Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia to join the Union, the number of ENP partner countries will shrink from 16 to 13. This raises the question of how Brussels will deal with the remaining states of the Eastern Partnership (as the Eastern dimension of the ENP)—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus—

³⁸ Accession negotiations are underway with Albania (since 2020), Montenegro (since 2012), North Macedonia (since 2020), and Serbia (since 2014). In December 2022, Bosnia and Herzegovina was granted candidate status, while Kosovo submitted its membership application.

and how it will design relations with the diverse group of ten countries in the EU's Southern Neighborhood.³⁹

With Georgia granted EU candidate status, it will be difficult in the future not to extend such status to Armenia, Azerbaijan, or Belarus, should these countries ever express interest and demonstrate progress in meeting the conditions for membership. In the years ahead, the European Union will most likely seek to enhance cooperation with Armenia and Azerbaijan through the Eastern Partnership, integrating them into a broader strategic design for the post-Soviet space. More specifically, these two countries could become important partners in the EU's connectivity agenda, linking the Black Sea region, the South Caucasus, the Caspian region, and Central Asia.⁴⁰ Ultimately, this will require a more comprehensive Eastern Neighborhood policy that includes Central Asia.⁴¹

Geography dictates that the Southern Neighborhood is not considered European; therefore, accession to the European Union is not an option. However, the European Union is deeply connected with its Southern partners. A study by the Bertelsmann Foundation details the scope and depth of these relations across trade, finance, technology and knowledge exchange, infrastructure connectivity, and labor mobility. In all these sectors, with few exceptions, the European Union is the dominant partner for most neighboring countries. However, its economic importance is not matched by political influence.⁴²

Although the report predicts growing interdependence between the European Union and its Southern neighbors (e.g., in energy, food security, and labor), the European Union has not yet aligned mutual interests within an attractive framework across the Northern and Southern shores of the Mediterranean. This diagnosis may do injustice to existing formats like the Union for the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, competing—if not contradictory—approaches by Southern EU member states (especially France and Italy), the lack of horizontal connectivity among North African states, and the political fragmentation of the Middle

³⁹ Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Syria, Palestine, and Tunisia.

⁴⁰ See, for example, the EU Global Gateway, "Investors Forum for EU-Central Asia Transport Connectivity, 29-30 January 2024, at SQUARE Brussels," https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/news-and-events/investors-forum-eu-central-asia-transport-connectivity_en. The event brought together governments, financing institutions, businesses, and civil society from Europe, Central Asia, and beyond. A total of €10 billion has been committed to sustainable transport connectivity in Central Asia.

⁴¹ Stefan Meister, Milan Nič, Iskra Kirova, and Steven Blockmans, "Russia's War in Ukraine: Rethinking the EU's Eastern Enlargement and Neighborhood Policy," *DGAP Report*, German Council on Foreign Relations, January 20, 2023, <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/russias-war-ukraine-rethinking-eus-eastern-enlargement-and-neighborhood>. Such a broad vision, of course, depends on the outcome of Russia's war against Ukraine, Russia's future domestic development, its role in Central Asia, and the overall EU-Russia relationship.

⁴² Richard Grieson and Stefani Weiss, eds., "Keeping Friends Closer: Why the EU Should Address New Geoeconomic Realities and Get Its Neighbors Back in the Fold," Report, 2nd updated edition (Bertelsmann Stiftung & The Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies, May 2023), <https://doi.org/10.11586/2023025>.

East have hindered the development of a common vision for a more integrated Mediterranean space. If the European Union wants to prevent China from becoming the partner of choice, it must more decisively strengthen its ties with the countries of the Middle East and North Africa.⁴³

EU Partnership Diplomacy with Emerging Powers

While the European Union looks back on a long history of partnership diplomacy, Russia's war of aggression has prompted it to further diversify its strategic partnerships with renewed vigor.⁴⁴ In addition to the over 40 trade agreements already in place, Brussels has recently concluded or renewed trade agreements with Chile (March 2024) and New Zealand (June 2022), and an Economic Partnership Agreement with Kenya (June 2023), all of which are currently under ratification. Negotiations for a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Australia and an EU-Mexico Association Agreement are expected to be completed by the end of 2024. New efforts are underway to ratify the EU-Mercosur Agreement, which has been under negotiation since 2000 and was concluded in June 2019. Mercosur unites Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay, with the European Union being the group's leading trading and investment partner. As mentioned, negotiations with India on a trade and investment agreement resumed in June 2022. Like the trade agreements achieved with Singapore (2014) and Vietnam (2015), the European Union is currently negotiating a free trade agreement with Indonesia. Bilateral talks with Jakarta began in 2016, and in December 2023, the 16th round of negotiations was held, demonstrating perseverance and a mutual willingness to compromise.⁴⁵

Functional Responses to Secure the European Economic-industrial Base

Finally, the EU's response to strategic competition can be seen in a whole range of initiatives aimed at securing its economic-industrial base:

A New EU Trade Policy: In February 2021, the EU Commission presented its new trade strategy, *An Open, Sustainable and Assertive Trade Policy*. Rather than

⁴³ For example, this could involve concluding fairer trade agreements to avoid increasing trade deficits in the Global South, engaging in political dialogue on an equal footing, increasing investment in connectivity, showing a willingness to tackle the energy transition and the implications of climate change together, and developing mechanisms and schemes that offer positive prospects for the next generation, while enabling labor mobility and limiting illegal migration to the European Union. See "Keeping Friends Closer," 83-92.

⁴⁴ Michael Smith, "The Geopolitics of the EU's Partnership Diplomacy: Strategic, Managerial, or Reactive?" *International Politics* 56, no. 3 (June 2019): 288-303, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-017-0127-8>; and Claudia Schmucker and Klemens Kober, "A Turning Point for EU Trade Policy After the Russian Aggression? Ukraine: The War that Changed the World, One Year On," DGAP External Publication, German Council on Foreign Relations, February 23, 2023, <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/turning-point-eu-trade-policy-after-russian-aggression>.

⁴⁵ All EU trade agreements and individual country/region relations can be found at https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region_en.

advocating that production should be brought back to the EU for greater autonomy, the Commission promotes greater openness to trade and investment as a means of supporting the EU economy's recovery from the COVID-19 crisis.

EU Global Gateway: Launched in December 2021, the Global Gateway is the EU's initiative to address the existing global investment gap in infrastructure and connectivity. It aims to promote trade, economic growth, and diplomatic ties with key partners. Global Gateway projects emphasize building global connections rather than dependencies, offering a European alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative.⁴⁶

EU Economic Security Strategy: Adopted in June 2023, the Economic Security Strategy outlines three priorities for securing the EU economic-industrial base: (1) promoting the EU's competitiveness by enhancing the resilience of the economy and supply chains, for example, through fostering research in strategic areas, such as advanced semiconductors, quantum computing, biotechnology, net-zero industries, clean energy, and critical raw materials; (2) protecting the European economy from commonly identified risks by more vigorously deploying existing tools, including trade defense measures, foreign subsidy controls, 5G/6G security measures, foreign direct investment screening, export controls, and the newly introduced instrument to counter economic coercion; and (3) partnering with the "broadest possible range of countries" to reinforce economic security, foster resilient and sustainable value chains, and strengthen the international rules-based economic order and multilateral institutions.⁴⁷

EU Critical Raw Materials Act: In its first annual *Critical Minerals Market Review*, released in July 2023, the International Energy Agency (IEA) highlighted the significantly increased demand for minerals needed for clean energy technologies.⁴⁸ In response to risks associated with supply chain disruptions, the European Parliament adopted the Critical Raw Materials Act in December 2023, just

⁴⁶ Beijing's efforts are significantly larger in financial terms: China provided over one trillion USD between 2013 and 2023, while the Global Gateway initiative is endowed with 300 billion euros for the period 2021-2027. Both initiatives are strategic projects aimed at competing for connectivity and partnerships. However, the EU approach emphasizes transparency and sustainability, aligning more closely with international objectives such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals. See Kalum Rock and Christian Hanelt, "Global Gateway: The EU Maps a Different Path than Belt and Road," *New Perspectives on Global & European Dynamics*, Bertelsmann Stiftung, October 19, 2023, <https://globaleurope.eu/europes-future/global-gateway-the-eu-maps-a-different-path-than-belt-and-road/>.

⁴⁷ European Commission, "Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council on 'European Economic Security Strategy,'" JOIN (2023)20 final, Brussels, June 20, 2023, 3-4, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52023JC0020>.

⁴⁸ Between 2017 and 2022, global demand increased by 300% for lithium, 70% for cobalt, and 40% for nickel, with this growth expected to continue in the coming years. See International Energy Agency (IEA), "Critical Minerals Market Review 2023," December 2023, www.iea.org/reports/critical-minerals-market-review-2023.

nine months after the Commission's proposal in March.⁴⁹ The new legislation mandates that by 2030, no single non-EU country shall produce more than 65 % of the EU's annual consumption of any strategic raw material.⁵⁰

New EU Subsidy Policy: To retain key industries in Europe, the EU Commission introduced a "matching aid mechanism," allowing EU member states to subsidize a company to the same extent it would receive in a third country outside the European Economic Area for its investment. The German government and Swedish battery producer Northvolt became the first to utilize this mechanism in January 2024.⁵¹

Conclusion

This article has shed light on the European Union's perception of strategic competition, its role in the world, the management of its relations with other major powers, and its efforts to navigate an era of global power shifts.

The degree of interconnectedness in today's globalized world was starkly revealed during the COVID-19 pandemic and further underscored by the consequences of Russia's war against Ukraine – particularly in the areas of global food supply chains and energy security. As the world's largest trading bloc, the European Union soon realized that *decoupling* from the global economy was not a viable option. Instead, the European Union and its member states have committed to *expanding* their international network at full speed. Efforts focus on diversifying both energy resources and partner countries while simultaneously enhancing the legislative framework to support domestic industries.

⁴⁹ European Commission, "Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a framework for ensuring a secure and sustainable supply of critical raw materials and amending Regulations (EU) 168/2013, (EU) 2018/858, 2018/1724 and (EU) 2019/1020," COM(2023) 160 final, Brussels, March 16, 2023, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:903d35cc-c4a2-11ed-a05c-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC_1&format=PDF.

⁵⁰ In addition, benchmarks have been set for the EU's own *domestic* capacities, which by 2030 will: (1) extract at least 10 % of the EU's annual consumption; (2) process at least 40 % of the EU's annual consumption; and (3) recycle at least 15 % of the EU's annual consumption. The EU Commission also plans to establish a "Critical Raw Materials Club," a platform to bring together resource-hungry and resource-rich countries to collaborate on diversifying critical raw materials value chains. See Francesco Findeisen, "The Club Approach: Towards Successful EU Critical Raw Materials Diplomacy," Policy Brief, Jacques Delors Centre, Hertie School, October 31, 2023, https://www.delorscentre.eu/fileadmin/2_Research/1_About_our_research/2_Research_centres/6_Jacques_Delors_Centre/Publications/20231031_Findeisen_CriticalRawMaterials.pdf.

⁵¹ Northvolt will receive €902 million in German state aid to build a gigafactory for battery cell production in the town of Heide, northern Germany. Without this instrument, Northvolt would have shifted its investment to the United States to take advantage of the U.S. Inflation Reduction Act.

The repeatedly stated ambition to cooperate “with the broadest possible range of partners” reflects several key features of how the European Union intends to “navigate” strategic competition. The EU shows

- *self-confidence* in its ability to shape relationships in its own interest and leverage its regulatory power by setting trade, industrial, labor, and human rights standards;
- *pragmatism* in choosing partners, recognizing that it cannot afford to divide the world into liberal democracies and restrictive autocracies; instead, Brussels must define red lines on a case-by-case basis;
- *geopolitical orientation*, combining its own transformation agenda (energy, climate, digitalization) with smart partnership diplomacy (e.g., connectivity, Global Gateway);
- *confidence* in its *diplomatic skillset* and staying power, as negotiation, cooperation, and compromise capabilities are central to its “DNA”; the EU has proven its ability to successfully negotiate EU accessions or trade agreements over 20 years;
- *balanced global relations*: The European Union believes that bilateral relations with other great powers like the United States, Russia, China, and India can be optimized and balanced with regional partnerships to sustain a global network.

The EU’s competitive formula seems to be “who cooperates best and in the most strategic fashion.” This distinguishes the European Union from other players on the global stage.

The EU’s activities over the last five years in the fields of accession policy, partnership and trade diplomacy, the green and digital transition, and initiatives on economic and supply chain security, coupled with considerations of geopolitics and connectivity, demonstrate its ability to act and adapt to a security environment shaped by strategic competition. While many of these initiatives reflect the EU Commission’s determination, the political unity of the member states has been crucial for united action – especially in supporting Ukraine.

However, this analysis has also revealed the challenges the EU faces, particularly in the areas of security and the transatlantic alliance. The United States remains by far the EU’s most important strategic partner; however, Washington’s tendency to divide the world into pro- and anti-China coalitions will complicate the EU-U.S. relationship. With 23 out of 27 EU member states also being members of NATO, the European Union and its member states are struggling to balance a more independent and cooperative approach to strategic competition with reliance on continued U.S. security commitments within NATO and on the European continent.

Hoping to count on the United States as a reliable partner, the EU’s ultimate goal in international politics remains unchanged: to uphold the rules-based international order and promote effective multilateralism. This goal is not only to sustain economic interoperability in a globalized world but also to address global

challenges that no country can manage alone, such as maritime security, space security, and the effects of climate change and environmental degradation.

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