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Challenges for the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy after 2022: Strategic Transformation, Industrial Sovereignty and Limits of Autonomy

Wyzwania Wspólnej Polityki Bezpieczeństwa i Obrony Unii Europejskiej po 2022 roku: transformacja strategiczna, suwerenność przemysłowa i granice autonomii

Abstract
This article analyses the challenges associated with the transformation of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy in the wake of fundamental shifts in the security environment following the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine in February 2022. It focuses on key strategic and institutional changes, including the implementation of the Strategic Compass, the bolstering of defence capabilities and capacities, and technological sovereignty. Concurrently, it identifies obstacles to the effective coordination and implementation of defence initiatives at member state level. Based on a normative-analytical approach and secondary analysis of strategic documents, the author evaluates the prerequisites for the EU's future operational autonomy in defence and security, while also highlighting the persistent fragmentation and political tensions that limit the effectiveness and efficiency of joint action. In conclusion, the author offers recommendations for strengthening the strategic cohesion and long-term resilience of European security and defence policy.

Keywords: Common Security and Defence Policy, Challenges, Strategic Compass, Strategic Autonomy, European Defence Industry

Streszczenie
Niniejszy artykuł analizuje wyzwania związane z transformacją Wspólnej Polityki Bezpieczeństwa i Obrony UE w następstwie fundamentalnych zmian w środowisku bezpieczeństwa po wybuchu konfliktu na Ukrainie w lutym 2022 roku. Koncentruje się na kluczowych zmianach strategicznych i instytucjonalnych, w tym na wdrożeniu Kompasu Strategicznego, wzmocnieniu zdolności i potencjału obronnego oraz suwerenności technologicznej. Równocześnie identyfikuje przeszkody w efektywnej koordynacji i implementacji inicjatyw obronnych na poziomie państw członkowskich. Bazując na podejściu normatywno-analitycznym oraz wtórnej analizie dokumentów strategicznych, autor ocenia przesłanki przyszłej autonomii operacyjnej UE w dziedzinie obrony i bezpieczeństwa, jednocześnie wskazując na utrzymującą się fragmentaryzację i napięcia polityczne, które ograniczają skuteczność i efektywność wspólnych działań. W podsumowaniu autor przedstawia rekomendacje dotyczące wzmocnienia spójności strategicznej i długoterminowej odporności europejskiej polityki bezpieczeństwa i obrony.

Słowa kluczowe: Wspólna Polityka Bezpieczeństwa i Obrony, Wyzwania, Kompas Strategiczny, Autonomia Strategiczna, Europejski Przemysł Obronny

Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 represents a fundamental geopolitical turning point. It has not only disrupted the post-war security architecture in Europe but has also spurred significant re-evaluation within the European Union's (EU) security and defence policy.[1] This military aggression served as a stark reminder of the existence of conventional threats in the EU's immediate neighbourhood, shattered the notion of a predictable security environment, and simultaneously highlighted the imperative to reassess existing tools of collective and preventive security. In this context, the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) has become a central focus as the primary instrument for responding to the strategic challenges Europe faces in an era of new geopolitical risks, hybrid threats, and shifting power balances.

For years, the CSDP was largely perceived as merely supplementary to the EU's diplomatic instruments. However, as a direct consequence of the conflict in Ukraine, it has begun to transform into a framework capable of not only responding to crisis situations but also proactively building defence capabilities and capacities, fostering technological autonomy, and enhancing the Union's geopolitical relevance. The EU's prior normative identity, predicated on upholding international law and a multilateral order, has now been augmented by a strategic ambition to act as a relevant geopolitical and security actor, capable of autonomously addressing new types of challenges. The CSDP is thus becoming not just a tool for cooperation, but also a fundamental pillar of European strategic sovereignty, resilience, and collective action.

The aim of this article is to analyse the most significant changes the CSDP has undergone since 2022, focusing on its strategic transformation, its technological and industrial dimension, and the challenges impeding its effective and purposeful implementation. The core research question is: To what extent has the CSDP, since 2022, moved towards becoming a functional and autonomous EU defence framework capable of confronting the security challenges of the 21st century? Building on this question, the author aims to: (1) identify the main strategic impulses and reforms within the CSDP, (2) analyse the tools and measures adopted since 2022 to strengthen the EU's defence capabilities and capacities, and (3) examine the factors that limit the operational autonomy and effectiveness of CSDP implementation in practice.

[1] See: T. Marcinkowski, *Reaction of the European Union to the Russian Aggression in Ukraine in 2022*, "Sõjateadlane The Estonian Journal of Military Studies" 2023, no. 23, pp. 36-52.

Methodologically, the article is based on a combination of descriptive and analytical methods. These are applied in the examination of relevant strategic documents (e.g., Strategic Compass, European Defence Industrial Strategy), political initiatives (EPF, Readiness 2030, IRIS[2]), and official EU policies. Secondary analysis encompasses academic and specialised literature in the fields of European security and defence policy, defence studies, and geopolitical analysis, thereby enabling a comparison between declared objectives and the actual performance of the CSDP. The research approach is grounded in a normative-analytical framework, which tracks how the EU's political ambitions are translated into concrete instruments and outcomes amidst deepening strategic uncertainty and power rivalry.

From a theoretical perspective, the article is situated within the broader debate in international relations on the EU's actorness and strategic autonomy. It draws on insights from liberal institutionalism and constructivist approaches, which highlight the role of institutions, norms and identities in shaping the EU's security and defence profile, while also engaging with realist perspectives that emphasise power, capabilities and dependence on the United States.[2] This combination allows for a more nuanced assessment of how the CSDP functions as a vehicle for transforming the EU from a predominantly normative power into a more fully-fledged security actor.

Strategic Transformation of the CSDP after 2022

The year 2022 marked a pivotal turning point in the history of the EU's CSDP, sparking an urgent need to re-evaluate the EU's role as a security actor in the context of the return of military force to the European space. The Russian Federation's military aggression against Ukraine dramatically disrupted the existing status quo, confronting the EU with the necessity to mobilise its political, strategic, and material capabilities to an unprecedented extent. This event not only posed a challenge to existing CSDP mechanisms but also opened the door for their fundamental transformation and strategic redefinition.[3]

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[2] See: D. Fiott, *A Clash of Concepts? Making Sense of 'European Sovereignty' and 'Strategic Autonomy'*, [in:] *Beyond Autonomy: Rethinking Europe as a Strategic Actor*, London School of Economics 2022, pp. 11-18, https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/reports/LSE-IDEAS-FNF-Beyond-Autonomy.pdf [date of access: 04.04.2025]; S. Biba , *The European Union's Place in United States–China Strategic Competition: How Role Dynamics Drive Brussels Towards Washington*, "Journal of Common Market Studies" 2024, no. 63 (1), pp. 71-88; S. Mohotti, S. Maheshi, *The European Union as a Security Actor: Balancing strategic autonomy and transatlantic alliances with NATO in a multipolar world*, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/393515714_The_European_Union_as_a_Security_Actor_Balancing_strategic_autonomy_and_transatlantic_alliances_with_NATO_in_a_multipolar_world [date of access: 04.04.2025].

[3] V. Jurčák, R. Ivančík, *Bezpečnostná a obranná politika Európskej únie*, Liptovský Mikuláš 2023V. Jurčák, R. Ivančík, *The conflict in Ukraine – A Turning Point for Security and Defence of the EU?*, "Security Dimensions" 2023, no. 44, pp. 84-101.

At the heart of this transformation was the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, approved by the EU Council in March 2022.[4] Unlike previous EU strategic documents – such as the European Security Strategy from 2003 or the EU Global Strategy from 2016 – the Strategic Compass has an explicit implementation character. Based on a consensus among member states, it provides a concrete action plan up to 2030 and is structured around four key pillars: act, secure, invest, and partner.[5] This structure reflects the need for increased operational readiness, protection of critical infrastructure, technological innovation, and deeper partnership cooperation both within and outside the EU.

Among the most significant concrete measures contained within the Strategic Compass is the establishment of the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC), which is planned to become operational by 2025. The RDC is intended to enable the EU to deploy up to 5,000 troops in crisis situations outside the Union's territory, addressing past shortcomings in the use of EU Battlegroups, which largely remained on paper due to a lack of unity among member states and technical obstacles. The new capacity is intended to be more flexible, multi-purpose, and prepared for a wide spectrum of missions, including evacuations, stabilisation operations, and the protection of civilian populations.[6]

Another significant development is the European Peace Facility (EPF), which was established in 2021[7] but gained its pivotal function only after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The EPF represents an off-budget financial mechanism enabling the EU to provide military assistance to partner countries. Since 2022, an unprecedented scope of military support for Ukraine, including weapons, training, and logistics, has been approved precisely through the EPF. This shift illustrates the EU's willingness to depart from exclusively civilian instruments and adopt harder forms of engagement in security policy.[8]

This trajectory of strategic strengthening of the CSDP has been further accelerated by the Readiness 2030 / ReArm Europe initiative, presented by the European Commission in 2025. Its goal is to mobilise €800 billion in investments

[4] Council of the EU, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence – For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security,* https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7371-2022-INIT/en/pdf [date of access: 04.04.2025].

[5] EEAS, *Strategic Compass for security and defence*, European External Action Service 2022, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-1_en [date of access: 04.04.2025].

[6] R. Castagnoli, *Enhancing European Crisis Response: From Battlegroups to the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity*, https://finabel.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/IF-PDFs.pdf [date of access: 12.04.2025].

[7] European Union, Council Decision (CFSP) 2021/509 of 22 March 2021 establishing a European Peace Facility, and repealing Decision (CFSP) 2015/528, EUR-Lex, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32021D0509 [date of access: 01.04.2025].

[8] C. Picconi, *From Vision to Action: examining the evolution and challenges of the European Union's Defense Policy*, https://tesi.luiss.it/42112/1/651402_PICCONI_CAROLA.pdf [date of access: 04.04.2025].

by 2030 to modernise European defence capabilities. The initiative includes measures such as fiscal flexibility within the Stability and Growth Pact, the creation of a credit facility for defence projects, the involvement of the European Investment Bank (EIB) in defence innovations, and support for private investments in strategic technologies.[9] Readiness 2030 thus represents a new framework for defence budgeting, designed to link the EU's strategic ambitions with concrete capability outputs.

A fundamental element of this strategic transformation is also a shift in the EU's identity as an actor. It is increasingly positioning itself not only as a normative force supporting multilateral rules but also as a geopolitical entity capable of active operational intervention in crisis situations. In line with the Strategic Compass, the EU seeks to overcome its dependence on external security guarantees (particularly NATO and the USA) and develop autonomous capabilities for planning, decision-making, and conducting military operations and missions. This pertains not only to physical capacities but also to the ability for strategic foresight, joint training, cyber defence, and coordinated decision-making at the level of the EU Council.[10]

The operationalisation of these strategic ambitions is evident not only in the creation of new instruments but also in the concretisation of their deployment. Examples include the more intensive activation of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) programmes,[11] expanded research funding through the European Defence Fund (EDF)[12], and projects such as Military Mobility,[13] which focus on removing infrastructural and regulatory barriers to the movement of military units. Furthermore, the concept of civil-military synergy is being developed, emphasising the dual use of technologies – for instance, in the fields of artificial intelligence or satellite communication.[14]

Despite these advancements, the CSDP's transformative process remains conditional on the cohesion of member states, the availability of resources, and

[9] European Commission, *Acting on defence to protect Europeans*, https://commission.europa.eu/topics/defence/future-european-defence_en [date of access: 13.06.2025].

[10] European External Action Service, *Progress Report on the Implementation of the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/2024-progress-report-implementation-strategic-compass-security-and-defence_en [date of access: 13.05.2025].

[11] European Defence Agency, *Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)*, https://eda.europa.eu/what-we-do/EU-defence-initiatives/permanent-structured-cooperation-(PESCO [date of access: 13.05.2025].

[12] European Defence Agency, *European Defence Fund (EDF)*, https://eda.europa.eu/what-we-do/EU-defence-initiatives/european-defence-fund-(edf [date of access: 13.05.2025].

[13] European Commission, *Military Mobility*, https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/military-mobility_en [date of access: 13.05.2025].

[14] European Defence Agency, *EDA Research, Technology, and Innovation Papers Award 2024*, https://eda.europa.eu/docs/default-source/documents/1_rti-papers-award-2024-booklet.pdf [date of access: 13.05.2025].

the ability to translate political commitments into concrete results. This represents a paradigm shift: from *ad hoc* crisis management towards a systematic strategic capacity capable of responding to global security challenges independently, yet in coordination with allies. The CSDP in the post-2022 era is thus transforming from a supplementary instrument into a key pillar of European strategic identity, fundamentally influencing the future development of European integration in defence.

Technological and Industrial Sovereignty as a Prerequisite for Strategic Autonomy

The EU's strategic autonomy in security and defence is inseparably linked to its level of technological and industrial sovereignty. At a time when global tensions are deepening and technological innovations determine the character of future conflicts, the EU's ability to ensure its own defence production, independent research, and secure supply chains becomes a fundamental condition for its geopolitical relevance. However, the long-standing fragmentation of the European defence industry represents one of the most significant obstacles to this objective.

Historically, the defence industries of EU member states have been characterised by a strong national orientation, which has led to excessive duplication of capabilities, limited interoperability, and low efficiency of public spending. In 2022, the 27 member states operated more than 17 different main battle tanks, 20 types of combat aircraft, and 29 variants of frigates. This contrasts sharply with the standardisation of capabilities in the USA, representing a strategic and logistical handicap.[15] This situation reduces the capacity for collective response to crisis situations and simultaneously weakens the competitiveness of European industry on a global scale.

The response to this situation was the adoption of the European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS) in 2024, which represents the first comprehensive framework for the development of a common defence industrial ecosystem. EDIS identifies key priorities as supporting cross-border projects, consolidating production, standardising technical requirements, and ensuring the resilience of supply chains. The strategic goal is to increase the share of public defence contracts awarded to European manufacturers to at least 35% by 2030.[16]

[15] M. Centrone, M. Fernandes, *Improving the quality of European defence spending*, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2024/762855/EPRS_STU(2024)762855_EN.pdf [date of access: 09.04.2025].

[16] European Commission, 2024b. *EDIS | Our common defence industrial strategy*, https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/edis-our-common-defence-industrial-strategy_en [date of access: 13.05.2025].

Part of the EDIS implementation is the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP), which was established as a financial and implementation instrument to support cross-border cooperation among small and medium-sized enterprises, joint development projects, and the creation of capacities in dual-use technologies.[17] EDIP also supports the IRIS^2 project (Infrastructure for Resilience, Interconnectivity and Security by Satellite), which aims to build an autonomous European satellite constellation for secure communication, Earth observation, and defence applications. This project responds to geopolitical tensions in space technologies and the need for sovereign access to data networks in an era of hybrid threats.[18]

A key prerequisite for achieving technological and industrial sovereignty is adequate funding for research and development. In this regard, the European Defence Fund (EDF) plays a significant role, having supported joint research and development projects since 2021. In recent years, the EDF has provided resources for innovative solutions in areas such as artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, advanced robotics, and autonomous systems. The Fund also supports projects with high technological added value that increase the EU's strategic independence from external suppliers.[19]

The European Investment Bank (EIB) is also an important actor in defence investments. Since 2022, it has gradually relaxed its conservative policy and begun financing projects with a defence or dual-use focus. These changes in EIB financing reflect a broader shift among European institutions towards a more pragmatic understanding of security as a prerequisite for sustainable development.[20] In addition to public resources, the private sector is increasingly involved in defence projects, with European start-ups and technology firms finding new opportunities in civil-military innovations, particularly in drone systems, satellite navigation, and quantum technologies.[21]

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[17] European Commission, 2024c. *EDIP | A Dedicated Programme for Defence*, https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/edip-dedicated-programme-defence_en [date of access: 13.05.2025].

[18] European Commission, 2024d. *IRIS^2: the new EU Secure Satellite Constellation*, https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-space/iris2-secure-connectivity_en [date of access: 13.05.2025].

[19] Council of the EU, *Commission Staff Working Document. Interim Evaluation of the European Defence Fund*, https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11026-2025-ADD-1/en/pdf [date of access: 27.05.2025]; European Commission, *EDF Interim Evaluation report*, https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/european-defence-fund-edf-official-webpage-european-commission/edf-interim-evaluation-report_en [date of access: 27.05.2025].

[20] European Investment Bank, *Investment Report 2024/2025: Innovation, integration and simplification in Europe*, https://www.eib.org/attachments/lucalli/20240354_investment_report_2024_en.pdf [date of access: 13.05.2025].

[21] European Investment Bank, *Public-private partnerships in security and defence,* https://www.eib.org/attachments/lucalli/20240222_100425_ppp_in_security_and_defence_en.pdf [date of access: 13.05.2025].

Despite these steps, the risks of dependence on external suppliers remain a significant factor in the EU's strategic vulnerability. A high degree of reliance on the USA for modern technology supplies – such as fifth-generation fighter jets, missile defence systems, and semiconductor components – reduces the capacity for autonomous decision-making and operations. Similarly, dependence on Asian markets for raw materials, batteries, and electronic components, which are crucial for the production of modern defence systems, also poses a risk. The COVID-19 pandemic, as well as geopolitical tensions in the Indo-Pacific, have demonstrated how quickly global supply chains can be disrupted, increasing pressure to create strategic reserves and diversified supplies.

Technological and industrial sovereignty is therefore not merely a matter of economic efficiency but a key element of the EU's strategic autonomy. Strengthening it requires a synergistic connection of political initiatives, legal frameworks, investment instruments, and scientific and research potential. In an era of geopolitical fragmentation and rapidly changing security threats, the defence industry becomes not only a tool for economic growth but also a pillar of the Union's strategic resilience.[22]

Barriers to Coordination and Implementation of Defence Initiatives

The European Union's ambitions in security and defence policy repeatedly encounter practical limitations in coordination and implementation. Despite the increasing frequency of initiatives and growing investment support, fundamental structural obstacles remain a persistent problem. These barriers are deeply rooted in the divergence of national interests and strategic cultures, inefficient bureaucratic infrastructure, technical fragmentation of defence systems, and insufficient political will to share sovereignty in key areas of defence.

One of the most serious impediments to successful coordination is the divergence of national interests and traditions in security policy. While some EU member states, such as France or Italy, advocate for a vision of strategic autonomy and active EU engagement as a global actor, others – particularly Central and Eastern European states – rely on transatlantic ties and the primacy of NATO as the main guarantor of security. This strategic asymmetry complicates joint planning, jeopardises political unity in approving initiatives, and creates tension between the ambitions and the reality of common action.[23]

[22] R. Ivančík, *O strategickej autonómii Európskej únie v kontexte vojny na Ukrajine*, "Vojenské reflexie" 2024, no. 19 (1), pp. 8-23; R. Ivančík, *O európskej strategickej autonómii v kontexte bezpečnostnej a obrannej politiky Európskej únie*, "Civitas" 2025, no. 1 (1), pp. 27-46.

[23] R. Balfour, E. Baroncelli et al., *Geopolitics and Economic Statecraft in the European Union*, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/11/geopolitics-and-economic-statecraft-in-the-european-union?lang=en [date of access: 13.05.2025].

These differences are also rooted in the distinct security and defence traditions of individual states, which manifest in national defence doctrines, budgetary priorities, and the level of public support for military deployment. For instance, while France traditionally employs an expeditionary approach and leads external missions, other states are more cautious regarding foreign operations. As a result, many EU defence initiatives – such as PESCO or military training missions – suffer from uneven participation of member states and insufficient shared responsibility.

Another obstacle is the complex and lengthy administrative and bureaucratic structure, which impedes the effective implementation of defence policies. The fragmentation of competences among the European Commission, the European External Action Service (EEAS), the European Defence Agency (EDA), and individual member states creates duplication in decision-making processes and slows down responsiveness in crisis situations. Moreover, many decisions in the CSDP still require unanimity, which allows individual states to block initiatives based on narrow national interests.[24]

An example of this is the prolonged delays in some projects within Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), where administrative hurdles and insufficient coordination lead to limited operational functionality. Although PESCO is considered a key instrument for developing EU defence capabilities, its implementation suffers from insufficient linkage with other mechanisms, such as the EDF or civilian CSDP instruments. These systems often operate in parallel, without sufficient synergy.

Another factor significantly limiting effective defence cooperation is low interoperability and differing technical standards among member states. The diversity of national defence systems – from communication protocols to weapon platforms – complicates joint force deployment and leads to inefficiencies in common operations (European Parliament, 2025). This lack of standardisation also affects training, maintenance, and logistics, increasing operational costs and reducing rapid response capabilities.

While NATO emphasizes technical interoperability within the Alliance,[25] many European initiatives are adapting slowly in this regard. Projects like Military Mobility promise to improve cross-border movement of military units and equipment, but their implementation faces infrastructural limitations,

[24] European Parliament, *Implementation of the common security and defence policy – annual report 2024*, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2025-0058_EN.html [date of access: 13.06.2025].

[25] North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Interoperability: connecting forces,*. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_84112.htm [date of access: 13.05.2025].

national regulatory differences, and slow progress in funding common standards. The European Defence Agency is striving to address this situation through harmonisation of requirements and joint programmes, yet the process is protracted and encounters resistance from states protecting their own industries.

Finally, political will and the question of shared sovereignty remain fundamental variables in the entire equation. Despite discursive support for the idea of strategic autonomy, many member states are unwilling to delegate key competencies to the European level.[26] Issues of national control over armed forces, selection of industrial partners, or participation in foreign missions remain in the hands of national governments. This reluctance complicates the creation of an effective operational framework and simultaneously undermines the EU's credibility as a defence actor.

In this context, it's essential to consider strengthening mechanisms for political alignment, for instance, through regular evaluations of defence spending and investments, deeper integration of industrial policies, and the linkage of civilian and military instruments. While initiatives like the Strategic Compass offer a vision and framework for the direction of European defence policy, their success will depend on the ability of member states to overcome the aforementioned obstacles and transform this vision into a concrete and functional policy.

EU Strategic Autonomy: Between Ideals and the Reality of Transatlantic Ties

Since 2022, the discussion surrounding the European Union's strategic autonomy in security and defence has become one of the key political agendas. In the context of Russian aggression against Ukraine and growing global great power rivalry, the urgency of the question has increased: to what extent can and should the EU act independently in crisis management, collective defence, and the protection of its strategic interests? Despite intensive political declarations and initiatives aimed at strengthening strategic sovereignty, the EU's autonomy remains predominantly a normative goal—its realisation is constrained by political, capability, and geopolitical realities.[27]

On one hand, the concept of strategic autonomy is viewed as an expression of the ambition for the EU to be able to independently identify and pursue its interests in a world increasingly defined by power rivalry and asymmetric threats. The Strategic Compass, adopted in March 2022, explicitly articulates this ambition,

[26] R. Ivančík, *O strategickej autonómii Európskej únie...*, op. cit., pp. 8-23; R. Ivančík, *O európskej strategickej autonómii...*, op. cit., pp. 27-46.

[27] Ibidem.

emphasizing the need to create a "reliable and capable actor" that can act independently in cases where transatlantic interests do not overlap or when NATO is unwilling to act. However, this rhetoric has encountered several limitations that question the feasibility of fulfilling this vision in the near to medium term.

One of the fundamental factors challenging the EU's full autonomy is its persistent reliance on the United States for collective defence and intelligence support.[28] Even after the creation of instruments like the EPF, RRF, and EDIP, the core of defence capabilities remains concentrated within NATO, with the USA providing crucial capabilities – from strategic reconnaissance to air defence. The war in Ukraine has only highlighted this imbalance: while European states have provided significant financial and military support, they would not have been able to ensure sustained defence support for Kyiv without American logistics and coordination.[29]

In parallel, there persists a political ambivalence among certain member states who, while participating in strategic autonomy projects, simultaneously emphasize the priority of transatlantic ties. Particularly the states on the eastern flank, which historically rely on American security guarantees, view EU initiatives as supplementary, not alternative. In their perception, autonomy is a legitimate goal only if it does not weaken NATO and does not diminish US engagement in European security. This cautious approach creates tension between the so-called strategic autonomists (e.g., France) and Atlanticists (e.g., Poland, the Baltics), hindering the formulation of a clear common framework.[30]

Another complication is the absence of a unified interpretation of the term 'strategic autonomy' itself. While it often appears as a synonym for independence in political discourse, at a practical level it signifies a degree of operational capability to act without external assistance in specific geographical or thematic areas. Such "functional autonomy" would not represent a departure from NATO but rather its complement in areas where the Alliance is not active – for example, in Africa, concerning hybrid threats, or in cybersecurity. However, even this pragmatically

[28] M. L. O'Sullivan, *A New Transatlantic Bargain: The Case for Building a Strong European Pillar,* https://www.belfercenter.org/transatlantic-bargain [date of access: 01.05.2025].

[29] International Crisis Group, *Ukraine and Beyond: Shaping Europe's Security Future*, https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/eastern-europe/ukraine-russia-internal-united-states/272-ukraine-and-beyond-shaping [date of access: 13.05.2025].

[30] D. Fiott, *A Clash of Concepts? Making Sense of 'European Sovereignty' and 'Strategic Autonomy'*, [in:] *Beyond Autonomy: Rethinking Europe as a Strategic Actor*, London School of Economics, pp. 11-18, https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/reports/LSE-IDEAS-FNF-Beyond-Autonomy.pdf [date of access: 13.05.2025].

defined autonomy is not yet fully realised, as evidenced by the EU's limited ability to respond to crisis situations without US support.[31]

At the same time, it's necessary to consider the global context of great power rivalry, which pushes the EU's strategic autonomy into a new dimension. In an environment of intensified competition among the USA, China, and Russia, the EU must contend not only with its own security but also with its ability to project norms, standards, and influence in third regions.[32] This geopolitical imperative creates pressure to intensify defence development, link the industrial and technological base, and establish a genuine "defence-technological union" that would ensure autonomy in key areas such as cybernetics, space, or artificial intelligence. Yet, these efforts also encounter fragmentation and weak coordination within the EU, as the preceding chapter illustrated.

In this context, strategic autonomy should be seen not as a dichotomy between Europe and the USA, but as a continuum of political possibilities in which the EU seeks to enhance its strategic capacity to act without undermining transatlantic unity. A "leadership partnership" model between the EU and the USA could represent a viable path, where Europe strengthens its own capabilities, assumes a greater share of responsibility, and simultaneously remains anchored in the Western alliance. Such a balance, however, requires a long-term commitment from member states, systematic investment, and the ability to overcome current barriers to cooperation.[33]

In conclusion, this chapter asserts that the EU's strategic autonomy is essential, but its fulfilment will depend not only on technical capacities and political will but also on redefining its relationship with the USA and NATO. This is a complex transformative process in which the EU is learning to think and act strategically without losing the support of its key allies. Only then will it succeed in transforming autonomy from an ideal into a sustainable geopolitical reality.

[31] Ibidem; S. Kilic, *Half-Hearted or Pragmatic? Explaining EU Strategic Autonomy and the European Defence Fund through Institutional Dynamics*, "Central European Journal of International and Security Studies" 2024, no. 18 (1), pp. 43-72

[32] S. Biba, *The European Union's Place in United States–China Strategic Competition: How Role Dynamics Drive Brussels Towards Washington*, "Journal of Common Market Studies" 2024, no. 63 (1), pp. 71-88.

[33] S. Kilic, *Half-Hearted or Pragmatic?...*, op. cit., pp. 43-72; S. Mohotti, S. Maheshi, *The European Union as a Security Actor: Balancing strategic autonomy and transatlantic alliances with NATO in a multipolar world*https://www.researchgate.net/publication/393515714_The_European_Union_as_a_Security_Actor_Balancing_strategic_autonomy_and_transatlantic_alliances_with_NATO_in_a_multipolar_world [date of access: 13.05.2025].

Conclusion and recommendation

The unprecedented shift in the security environment following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has compelled the European Union to rethink its role as a security and defence actor. This article has shown that this turning point triggered a dense sequence of initiatives within the framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), which together amount to more than a mere crisis reaction. Instruments such as the Strategic Compass, the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity, the European Peace Facility, Readiness 2030 and new generations of training and exercises indicate that the EU is attempting to move from an ad hoc, mission-oriented approach towards a more systematic and long-term strategic posture.

At the same time, the analysis has demonstrated that this transformation remains constrained by structural limitations. Diverging national interests and strategic cultures, administrative complexity, low interoperability and the persistent reluctance of member states to share sovereignty in core defence areas continue to hinder the full implementation of initiatives launched since 2022. These constraints reveal that the evolution of the CSDP is not only a technical or bureaucratic process, but above all a political one – dependent on the willingness of member states to develop a shared strategic culture and assume joint responsibility for collective defence.

A key conclusion of this study is that debates on the EU's strategic autonomy can no longer be understood solely in military terms. The analysis confirms and further elaborates the increasingly recognised link between strategic autonomy and questions of technological and industrial sovereignty. Without a more integrated and competitive European defence industrial base, the EU's ambition to act as a credible security actor will remain largely declaratory. Documents such as the European Defence Industrial Strategy, and instruments like EDIP, the EDF or IRIS^2 therefore play a central role in bridging the gap between political ambitions and material capabilities.

In theoretical terms, the article has situated the CSDP's evolution within broader international relations debates on actorness and autonomy. Liberal-institutionalist and constructivist approaches help to explain how norms, institutions and identities shape the EU's security profile, while realist perspectives draw attention to power asymmetries, dependence on the United States and the logic of alliance politics. The current trajectory of the CSDP reflects a gradual attempt to reconcile these dimensions: to remain anchored in the transatlantic framework while simultaneously strengthening the EU's own capacity to act.

On this basis, the analysis supports three main recommendations for the future development of the CSDP:

1. Align ambitions with capabilities. The EU should ensure that new strategic concepts and initiatives are accompanied by realistic timelines, adequate funding and clear benchmarks for implementation. Regular and transparent assessments of progress under the Strategic Compass and related instruments would help to maintain credibility and political support.
2. Deepen the integration of defence, industrial and technological policies. Strategic autonomy requires a coherent ecosystem that links defence planning, industrial policy, research and innovation. Strengthening the European Defence Industrial Strategy, fostering cross-border projects and promoting standardisation and interoperability are crucial steps in this regard.
3. Reframe strategic autonomy within the transatlantic partnership. Rather than presenting autonomy as an alternative to NATO, the EU should conceptualise it as functional autonomy in selected areas, complementary to the Alliance. A stronger European pillar within the transatlantic relationship would allow the EU to assume greater responsibility for its own security, while maintaining the benefits of collective defence with the United States.

In sum, the post-2022 evolution of the CSDP can be interpreted as the beginning of a gradual strategic transformation of the EU as a security actor. This transformation is uneven and remains incomplete, but it signals an emerging recognition that a purely normative role is no longer sufficient in an increasingly competitive and conflict-prone international order. Whether the EU will succeed in becoming a fully-fledged geopolitical actor will depend on its ability to translate these insights into sustained political commitment, practical cooperation and long-term investment in its own security and defence capacities.

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