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SECURITY, POWER AND EUROPEAN STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN A TRANSFORMING GLOBAL ORDER

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Abstract. This article examines the evolving relationship between politics and security in an era characterised by increasing power rivalry, multipolar competition, and strategic uncertainty. The author argues that contemporary security dynamics can no longer be understood within traditional state-centric or purely military frameworks, as power is increasingly exercised through economic interconnectedness, technological control, regulatory influence, and informational superiority. It employs an interdisciplinary approach, drawing from security studies, international relations, and political theory, to analyse how globalisation has transformed security into a competitive and perpetually contested domain. Particular attention is paid to the European Union, which currently faces the dual challenge of heightened external vulnerability and internal pressure to preserve its normative identity. In this context, the author examines the concept of European strategic autonomy as a response to weaponised interdependence and hybrid forms of power, critically assessing its limits and contradictions. Through the reconceptualisation of power, authority, and competition, the article contributes to ongoing theoretical discourse on European security and offers a nuanced framework for understanding security governance in a transforming global order.

Keywords: security; power transformation; European strategic autonomy; multipolar global order; strategic uncertainty; weaponised interdependence

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1. Introduction

In the current era of strategic uncertainty and a rapidly shifting global order, the scholarly examination of the relationship between politics, security, and international relations is acquiring renewed significance. The continuous deterioration of both the global and regional security environment, including the war in Ukraine, armed conflicts in the Middle East, and growing tensions in the Indo-Pacific region, clearly demonstrates that the international system is confronting a series of complex and interconnected crises. These crises threaten not only the stability of individual states but also the very foundations of the liberal international order. These events and phenomena do not occur in a vacuum; rather, they are deeply embedded within the broader structure of globalised multipolar competition, which is disrupting traditional notions of sovereignty, power, and security.

The conflict in Ukraine has become a paradigmatic example of the open violation of the European security architecture (Graham, 2024; Ivančík & Andrassy, 2025; Bond, 2025). Concurrently, it serves as a clear manifestation of the hybrid nature of contemporary threats, which encompass: cyber-attacks on both public and private institutions; the misuse of social media and digital platforms for disseminating disinformation, conspiracy theories, and manipulating public opinion; economic coercion; the weaponisation of energy flows; and other activities that combine conventional and unconventional methods and tactics, legal and illegal instruments and mechanisms, as well as regular and irregular forces and means (Ivančík & Andrassy, 2024; Ivančík et al., 2024). Furthermore, the parallel conflict between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip illustrates how regional crises can easily escalate into globally sensitive security dilemmas (Hassoun et al., 2025; Batool, 2025). The common denominator of these phenomena is the breakdown of traditional power balances and the weakening effectiveness of international norms and institutions, which creates a permissive environment for the aggressive strategies of great powers and non-state actors.

Globalisation, initially celebrated as a source of prosperity and integration, has increasingly revealed itself in recent years to also be a vector for fragmentation, disciplining, and vulnerability. Hybrid threats, the strategic weaponisation of interdependence as a tool of coercion, and the return of overt geopolitical rivalry are symptoms of a new power order in which the instruments of power are dispersed across state, transnational, and technological actors. The very technologies and interconnections that once strengthened cooperation are now frequently being turned into tools for political dominance and repression (Farrell & Newman, 2019; Suter & Ziltener, 2024).

The contemporary epoch is characterised by increasingly pronounced multipolarity and the emergence of new power centres that challenge the West's current dominance in international security and political normativity. The rise of China, the revisionist ambitions of Russia, the growing assertiveness of Turkey, and the fragmentation of transatlantic unity all provide evidence that traditional power alliances are being severely tested. Europe—as a space of both internal integration and geopolitical vulnerability—thus finds itself at the epicentre of this global transformation. Therefore, the security and political reflection on this situation necessitates a new research approach that integrates theoretical concepts with an analysis of power, authority, and competition within an interconnected international sphere.

Simultaneously, the very concept of security is undergoing a reconfiguration. From a classically understood military-strategic concept, security is evolving into a fluid, multidimensional, and often subjectively perceived framework. Within this framework, not only states but also non-state actors, transnational organisations, technology companies, and information networks are playing increasingly crucial roles (Breslin & Nesadurai, 2018; Balarabe, 2025). Politics and security are no longer isolated spheres; they are increasingly intertwined through mechanisms such as strategic narratives, digital dominance, energy dependency, and economic coercive diplomacy (Dirma et al., 2024; Okunevičiūtė et al., 2025).

The current international reality therefore necessitates a fresh academic perspective on the interplay among politics, security, and international relations, especially within the European context. This calls for a critical, interdisciplinary, and theoretically grounded approach that analyses how the forms of power and authority are changing in an era of hybrid threats, strategic uncertainty, and globalised competition. This article aims to provide precisely such a reflection, to offer a systematic and theoretically informed analysis of these relationships, focusing on European contexts, risks, and transformative trends.

Our research is grounded in the premise that the scholarly examination of the relationship between politics, security, and power has evolved since the end of the Cold War in close conjunction with shifts in the global order, technological development, and the changing nature of threats. Traditional realist and neorealist concepts, represented by authors such as Mearsheimer (2014), emphasised the centrality of the state, military force, and the anarchical structure of the international system. Conversely, constructivist approaches broadened the understanding of security to include identity, norms, and the socially constructed meanings of threats. The approach of the Copenhagen School (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998), which introduced the concept of securitisation as a process of discursively constructing threats, has been particularly influential in this context.

The literature dedicated to power has also diversified. In addition to the classic distinction between hard power and soft power (Gallarotti, 2010), new concepts have emerged in the last decade, such as sharp power (Walker, 2018; Walker et al., 2020), connectivity power (Leonard, 2021), and weaponised interdependence (Farrell & Newman, 2019), which reflect the transformation of power instruments in a globalised, digitally interconnected world. Scholars like Barnett and Duvall (2005) and Lukes (2021) have sought to develop multidimensional typologies of power, encompassing not only material resources but also symbolic dominance, normative frameworks, and the capacity to shape the preferences of others.

In the sphere of European security, particular significance is attached to works that analyse the EU as a normative, regulatory, or post-sovereign actor. Manners (2002) introduced the concept of Normative Power Europe, while authors such as Bickerton et al. (2015), Lippert et al. (2019), and Beaucillon (2023) discuss the possibilities and limitations of strategic autonomy. Standing out from the literature on hybrid threats are works by Ferrag et al. (2023), Borch and Heier (2024), and Ivančík and Nečas (2025), which identify new forms of threats and destabilisation in the digital and informational space.

In light of the above, it can be concluded that the available literature, while extensive, provides fragmented knowledge regarding security, authority, and power within the European and global context. For this reason, this article seeks to synthesise these findings, extend them with new analytical concepts, and demonstrate how the nature of security reasoning is changing under conditions of strategic uncertainty, hybrid threats, and globalised power competition.

The objective of this academic article is to examine the relationships between politics, security, and international relations within the European context, with attention to the shifting global environment characterised by strategic uncertainty, power rivalry, and escalating hybrid threats. On a methodological level, the article is primarily based on a qualitative research approach that combines critical analysis of scholarly sources, discursive analysis, and comparative geopolitical reflection. It employs interdisciplinary frameworks from political science theory, security studies, international relations, and critical geopolitics. The research questions are addressed through an analytical-synthetic procedure that links empirical observations with conceptual frameworks.

The structure of the article is divided into four thematic chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter analyses the relationship between politics and security in the environment of globalised multipolar competition. The second chapter focuses on the specifics of the European context and the tension between strategic autonomy and great power rivalry. The third chapter provides a theoretical reflection on the concepts of power, authority, and competition, while the fourth chapter examines the reconceptualisation of political authority in the context of globalised challenges. The concluding section summarises the main findings and formulates normative considerations concerning the direction of European security policy in a dynamically changing international environment.

2. Security and Politics under Conditions of Globalised Multipolar Competition

Globalisation, which can be understood as a set of deepening transnational interconnections and an acceleration of the exchange of goods, capital, information, and people, has fundamentally transformed the frameworks within which power, security, and politics are conceived.

The state is not excluded from this environment, yet its role is shifting. Neoliberal globalisation does not displace the state but rather reconfigures it, from an actor of direct governance to an actor ensuring the conditions for ‘competitiveness’ on a global scale. This normative pressure is reflected in the politics of the ‘state as a firm’, that is, in understanding governance as the management of competition, the optimisation of performance, and the internationalisation of regulatory standards (Scholte, 2008).

However, parallel to economic globalisation, a transformation is also underway in the field of security. In an era of multipolar competition, the politics of security is becoming an arena where the power interests of actors

such as the USA, China, Russia, the EU, and others intersect. In contrast to the post-war bipolarity or the unipolarity of the 1990s, the contemporary security environment is characterised by fluid alliances, a competition of norms, and asymmetric instruments of power (Acharya, 2014). Furthermore, multipolarity is not manifesting solely in the traditional military-strategic sphere, but also in the technological, cyber, informational, and economic domains.

Competition between great powers under conditions of globalisation is no longer primarily about controlling territory but about controlling flows—of data, capital, energy, technologies, and narratives (Farrell & Newman, 2019). This new form of geopolitical competition results in security tools becoming an inseparable part of economic and technological policy—ranging from embargoes and sanctions to the control of chip exports and the shaping of technological standards and cyber alliances (Leonard, 2021; OECD, 2025).

In this context, security policies are increasingly acquiring a ‘competitive character’—not as a means of defence against attack, but as a tool for strategic dominance, containment of others’ influence, and the enforcement of one’s own standards and preferences. As Ikenberry (2018) argues, the current great power competition is not just military, but ideological, normative, and technological, with the core of the conflict being the question of who defines the rules of the global order.

The term ‘competitiveness’ has acquired a new meaning in the political-security discourse following the Cold War. Originally an economic term, it has become a metapolitical principle under the influence of neoliberal governance, redefining the state’s objective function—not as a steward of the collective good, but as an ‘entrepreneur on behalf of the national interest’ (Slobodian, 2018). A state conceptualised in this manner strives to optimise its position in the global order, not only through economic means but increasingly through security means, thereby blurring the lines between economic policy and security strategy.

In this context, a fundamental transformation of the concept of security is taking place. According to Buzan et al. (1998), security is no longer limited to military defence but expands into the domains of political stability, economic performance, technological sovereignty, societal cohesion, and environmental threats. Security thus becomes a multidimensional and constantly securitised agenda, an object of competitive discourse between states, where nearly any issue is potentially subject to a security solution (Balzacq, 2011).

The multipolar environment further deepens this development. In the absence of a dominant hegemon, the frequency and intensity of security competition increase—not as open conflict, but as a series of races in the fields of innovation, influence, legitimacy, and norm-setting. Contemporary competition is not merely economic or military; it is a ‘competitive logic’ framing the entire international order, which transforms even peaceful relations into competitive and hierarchical ones.

This phenomenon has fundamental implications for the European space. European states, which historically founded their security on institutionalised cooperation and normative power (Manners, 2002), today face the challenge of adapting to an environment where soft power is systematically questioned, and where strategic autonomy cannot be achieved without building proprietary capabilities and capacities (Fiott, 2025). Security policy has thus returned to the centre of political discourse, not as a marginal or technical matter, but as the main instrument for survival and self-assertion in a competitive world.

One of the principal consequences of globalised multipolar competition is the growing need for a fundamental revision of strategic thinking. This thinking can no longer be based exclusively on the logic of traditional realism but must reflect the complexity and interconnectedness of new security threats and challenges. In an environment where security, competitiveness, and geopolitical influence are increasingly intertwined, it ceases to be possible to think about defence and stability separately from economic, technological, ecological, or societal dimensions. Security policy thus becomes an ever more pronounced dimension of every significant public policy, from industrial to educational, and politics itself acquires a security character through the so-called securitisation of identity, values, and performance within the international system (Balzacq, 2011).

This trend leads to the erosion of classical dichotomies that shaped strategic thinking throughout the greater part of the 20th century—such as war versus peace, threat versus challenge, or risk versus opportunity. Currently,

these concepts are overlaid by hybrid dynamics, which combine elements of military, cyber, informational, energy, and economic power into fluid, difficult-to-predict forms of operation (Caliskan, 2019; Mumford, 2020). For instance, economic sanctions, which once served a supplementary role in foreign policy, are now becoming a key instrument of geostrategic coercion. Similarly, technological dependence—for example, in semiconductors, artificial intelligence, or cloud infrastructures—is increasingly understood as a strategic vulnerability that can be mobilised as a tool of power if required (Mayer & Lu, 2025; Reinhold, 2025).

The response to these challenges, therefore, requires complex, adaptive, and systemically interconnected strategies that can account for multiple dimensions of security simultaneously. This entails integrating a security perspective into policies concerning digital transformation, climate adaptation, energy transition, or economic diplomacy, areas that were until recently considered ‘technocratic’ or ‘neutral’ (Bremmer, 2022). Political decision-making must thus adopt ‘strategic thinking in horizons of uncertainty’, the ability to anticipate the indirect consequences of crises and to formulate policies with an awareness of the competitive logic that is increasingly penetrating all spheres of the global order.

Europe finds itself in a particularly complex position in this process. On the one hand, it faces the need to strengthen its capabilities and capacities in strategic autonomy, technological sovereignty, and resilience against external pressures. On the other hand, it strives to preserve the normative values that historically defined it as an area of peace, rule of law, and multilateralism (Manners, 2002; Fiott, 2025). This tense equilibrium between competition and cooperation, between power and law, between autonomy and interconnectedness, will continue to define the parameters of European security policy in the 21st century (Desmaele, 2025; Fiott, 2025).

As current academic literature shows, if the political and security reflection on global competition is to be effective, it must be multidimensional, interdisciplinary, and normatively conscious. It is not only about defending territory but also about protecting the fundamental democratic values, institutions, and identity that European societies have built since the Second World War. It is about formulating a policy capable of responding to unpredictable changes without losing its legitimacy and ethical integrity—in short, a policy that is not only efficient and effective but also value-anchored.

3. European Strategic Autonomy Amid Global Power Rivalry

In recent years, the European Union has found itself at the heart of a shifting geopolitical space, forcing it to redefine its position, strategic ambitions, and instruments of action. Despite the EU’s long-standing self-portrayal as an actor founded on norms, multilateral rules, and ‘soft power’ (Manners, 2002), it faces increasing pressure to adapt to the reality of multipolar competition. In this new reality, merely promoting values is insufficient; defending one’s own interests is essential.

The catalyst for this shift was primarily the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which disrupted the fundamental premises of the European security architecture (Graham, 2024; Ivančík & Andrassy, 2025; Bond, 2025). It became apparent that the security the EU had long outsourced to NATO and transatlantic ties is not guaranteed in an environment where great powers employ military force, hybrid operations, and economic weapons as foreign policy tools. The result is a gradual, albeit ambivalent, movement towards building strategic autonomy—the capacity to act independently, collectively, and effectively in the realm of security and defence (Fiott, 2025).

The concept of strategic autonomy has become one of the central points of European debate since 2016, notably following the UK’s departure from the EU and during the presidency of Donald Trump, who questioned the meaning of transatlantic ties. Strategic autonomy was initially understood predominantly in the defence domain—as the EU’s capacity to act autonomously in the absence of the United States. However, it gradually acquired a broader meaning, encompassing economic and technological sovereignty, energy security, the capacity to respond to disinformation, and geopolitical resilience (Lippert et al., 2019).

On the other hand, this strategy is being forged amidst increasingly intense great power rivalry. The US, China, and Russia are vying for global influence, placing the EU in a complex position: on one side, it is firmly anchored within NATO; on the other, it is conscious of its reliance on the American security guarantee.

Simultaneously, it faces growing pressure from China, particularly in technological standards, investments, and disinformation campaigns (Esteban et al., 2025).

This reality compels the EU to balance between the pursuit of autonomy and the necessity of cooperation. The EU finds itself in a ‘geopolitical squeeze,’ forcing it to act strategically, yet without an adequate power base (Bogdanos, 2025). The response has included several initiatives, such as the European Defence Fund (EDF), Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the Strategic Compass (2022), and ambitions to expand its so-called civil-military capabilities and capacities.

The increasing intensity of strategic rivalry among great powers has led to a fundamental change in the perception of globalisation. While in previous decades economic interconnectedness was viewed as a factor of stability and cooperation, the present shows its reverse side, globalisation has become a source of vulnerability, and interdependence has transformed into a means of coercion (Cerny, 2009; Mazzar, 2022). This phenomenon is often termed in contemporary literature as *weaponised interdependence* (the transformation of interdependence into a tool of coercion, or interdependence as a weapon). In practice, this refers to a situation where states utilise their central position within global networks—for instance, in financial flows, technological infrastructure, or logistical chains, as an instrument of geopolitical pressure (Farrell & Newman, 2019).

The European Union, which had long been one of the greatest proponents of globalisation, finds itself in a highly vulnerable position in this new environment. Dependence on chip supplies from Taiwan, vulnerability to Chinese dominance in critical raw materials, and Russian influence on the European energy market in the years preceding the invasion of Ukraine revealed that economic openness without a geopolitical strategy can be a strategic deficit. Supply chain crises during the COVID-19 pandemic only deepened the awareness of the need to increase resilience and diversification, not only in the economic sense but also in terms of security and technology (European Commission, 2023).

In response to these challenges, the EU began to promote the concept of *open strategic autonomy*. This is an effort to reconcile the principle of economic openness with the capacity to act independently in key areas, such as defence, healthcare, digital infrastructure, and energy. This approach is founded on the premise that autonomy and interconnectedness need not be mutually exclusive, provided that interdependence is symmetrical, controllable, and does not lead to unilateral vulnerability (Damen, 2022; Schmitz & Seidl, 2022).

However, interdependence when weaponised or used for coercion also creates new tensions within the EU. This phenomenon directly follows the broader trends of security’s transformation into a competitive and permanently securitised agenda, as elaborated in the first part of the article. States with diverse economic models (Cabelkova et al., 2021) and divergent geopolitical priorities differ in how they interpret the balance between autonomy and integration. While France advocates for stronger EU defence sovereignty and industrial capacity, other countries, such as Germany and Central and Eastern European states—prioritise the transatlantic link and a liberalised trade model. This diversity complicates the building of a unified European approach to geopolitical challenges (Alcidi et al., 2023; Juncos & Vanhoonacker, 2024).

In an effort to reinforce its geopolitical relevance, the European Union strives to consolidate existing foreign, security, and defence policy instruments. Despite limited competencies in common defence, the EU is attempting to acquire a more strategic posture through several initiatives. A significant step was the adoption of the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence in 2022, a document that systematically defines, for the first time, the EU’s ambitions in defence, security, and crisis response. The Compass stresses the need to enhance the level of European defence capabilities and capacities, the necessity of rapid reaction (e.g., the creation of the ‘EU Rapid Deployment Capacity’), improvement of military mobility, and coordination in cyber defence and space (European Council, 2022).

In response to escalating geopolitical tensions, particularly due to ongoing Russian aggression in Ukraine and uncertainty regarding transatlantic cooperation, the European Union presented the ambitious ReArm Europe initiative in 2025, later renamed Readiness 2030. This plan aims to mobilise up to €800 billion to strengthen the

defence capacities of Member States, support joint procurement, and invest in key technologies such as drones, cyber defence, quantum technologies, and military mobility (Clapp et al. 2025).

Part of this plan includes the new Security Action for Europe (SAFE) financial instrument, which provides €150 billion in the form of low-interest loans for common defence projects, thereby supporting more efficient use of resources and reducing dependence on external suppliers (European Commission, 2025). Parallel to this plan, the EU adopted the Cyber Solidarity Act in December 2024, which entered into force in February 2025. This legislative act introduces an EU-wide framework for the detection, preparedness, and response to cyber threats, including the establishment of a network of national and cross-border cyber centres and an early warning system (European Union, 2025).

These initiatives represent a significant shift in the EU's approach to security, where emphasis is placed not only on traditional military capabilities and capacities but also on strategic autonomy, regulatory sovereignty, and democratic integrity. At the same time, they reflect the need for a proactive and value-anchored approach to security challenges, one that involves not only state institutions but also civil society and other non-state actors. Alongside these developments, other established formats of cooperation, such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF), continue to evolve, serving as the basis for the collective development of military capacity and support for the defence industry within the EU. However, these instruments face limitations in the form of differing strategic cultures among Member States, uneven distribution of industrial capacities, and long-term dependencies on non-European partners, primarily the USA (Mejino-López & Wolff, 2025; Ivančík & Andrassy, 2025).

Despite these challenges, there has been increasing emphasis in recent years on building civilian and technological autonomy, which is intended to serve as a supporting pillar for strategic autonomy (Anghel et al., 2020). The EU is investing in research, digitalisation, cybersecurity, and artificial intelligence, becoming increasingly aware that technological dependence on third countries poses a risk not only to economic sovereignty but also to the capacity to act independently in crisis situations (Ramahandry et al. 2021; Bria et al., 2024).

The geopolitical environment also forces the EU to address its relationship with NATO, the United States, and strategic partnerships outside the Western world. The transatlantic link remains a crucial guarantee of collective defence. Simultaneously, the EU seeks to increase its own operational capacity in strategic communication, hybrid threats, cybersecurity, and resilience against disinformation. In this context, the need to build complementarity between the EU and NATO, rather than competition, is often highlighted (Ewers-Peters, 2025).

Furthermore, in the context of growing rivalry between the USA and China, pressure on European states to align with one side or the other is mounting. However, the EU strives for a strategic balance, in which it retains the space for autonomous decision-making without completely submitting to the logic of bipolar conflict. This stance is increasingly articulated in terms such as “Geopolitical EU” or “European Sovereignty,” which express the ambition to promote common interests and norms in the global system on the basis of value-anchored multilateralism (Jørgensen et al., 2025).

The European Union today faces a contradictory and simultaneously existential challenge: how to remain a geopolitically relevant actor in a time of growing great power confrontation, escalating security threats, and fragmentation of the international order, all while preserving its own normative identity, internal unity, and democratic values. The pursuit of strategic autonomy is the logical culmination of the recognition that security reliance on external actors, especially the USA, may not be guaranteed in the future. At the same time, the EU acknowledges that it does not possess the traditional instruments of hard power that would enable it to compete effectively with global rivals such as China or Russia (Michaels & Sus, 2024).

This paradox, the ambition for autonomy in the absence of a robust military foundation, conditions the European approach to security and power. Consequently, the EU relies on a combination of soft and civilian instruments, strengthening technological and economic resilience, building network partnerships, and protecting the

information space. However, these tools are often dispersed, uncoordinated, and limited by divergent national interests. Strategic autonomy thus becomes not only an objective but also a test of the coherence and political will of the European project (Hoeffler et al., 2024; Desmaele, 2025).

Great power rivalry and the weaponisation of interdependence also necessitate a thoughtful and resilient strategy for interaction with the external world—from energy diplomacy and trade regimes to strategic communication. In this context, it is vital for the EU to transition from reactive politics to a proactive geopolitical vision, one that is capable not only of responding to crises but also of co-creating the rules and frameworks of the global order (Varma, 2024).

The current geopolitical reality demonstrates that a post-hegemonic world requires new models of cooperation, where autonomy does not mean isolation but the capacity to act independently while simultaneously cooperating effectively with partners. In this context, the EU can offer an alternative to traditional models of power politics—provided it can transform its normative power, technological potential, and institutional experience into effective strategic operational capability (Taggart & Abraham, 2024; Shkliarevsky, 2024).

4. European Security and the Transformation of Power, Authority, and Competition

Following the analysis of globalised multipolar competition and European strategic autonomy, this section focuses on a deeper reconceptualisation of the fundamental categories of power, authority, and competition in the current security environment.

In the changing global environment, characterised by fragmentation, network interconnectedness, and multipolar rivalry, a fundamental shift is occurring in the understanding of core categories such as power, authority, and competition. These concepts can no longer be considered solely within the context of traditional realism, where power equals military strength, authority equals sovereign legitimacy, and competition equals state dominance in an anarchical system. Instead, they are acquiring new, more complex meanings that reflect the nature of the globalised reality of the 21st century.

Power is now increasingly interpreted not as the ability to compel another actor, but as the capacity to shape the environment in which decision-making takes place, i.e., as ‘agenda-setting power’ (Barnett & Duvall, 2005). This means that the significance of power is shifting from direct coercive force to structural and normative mechanisms through which actors set the rules of the game. The EU, which possesses limited military capacity but strong regulatory power, is an example of the so-called *market power Europe*, the ability to influence global standards through norms, legal frameworks, and technical regulations (Bradford, 2020).

Concurrently, the understanding of authority is also changing. In an era of transnational challenges that transcend state borders, such as climate change, cyber security, pandemics, or migration crises—authority is increasingly dispersed across multiple levels and actors. The classical principle of state sovereignty is supplemented or replaced by post-sovereign authority, which is based on expertise, multilateral commitments, or technocratic legitimacy (Zürn, 2017). This development leads to the strengthening of the roles of international organisations, agencies, expert networks, and global regulatory regimes.

Even competition itself is no longer solely a matter of military or economic superiority. A new type of competition is emerging: *competitive interdependence*, in which actors are simultaneously partners, rivals, and opponents. In this environment, competition is waged over network positions, access to data, the capacity to shape narratives, and the control of value chains—from critical raw materials to digital platforms. This is competition in a space that is globally interconnected yet simultaneously heavily politicised and geopolitically charged (Farrell & Newman, 2019).

The transformation of the concept of power in international relations reflects profound changes in the conditions under which power is exercised and perceived. While classical realist paradigms emphasised material capabilities, primarily military ones, the contemporary discussion is shifting towards understanding power as a discursive, contextual, and networked phenomenon. In a globalised world, what is decisive is not merely how much power an actor possesses, but how, where, and with what legitimisation it is applied.

In this regard, new types of power, which extend beyond the framework of the classical categories of hard and soft power, acquire crucial significance. These concepts reflect new modalities of influence in a globalised, networked, and information-saturated world, where instruments of coercion are often invisible, indirect, and non-military.

Soft power represents the capacity of a state or actor to influence the behaviour of others through the attractiveness of its values, culture, and political institutions, rather than through coercion or rewards. This type of power is particularly important for the European Union, which has long based its international identity on “normative influence” (Manners, 2002) and the promotion of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. The EU’s soft power manifests primarily in development aid, educational programs, cultural diplomacy, and the capacity to create global regulatory standards (Bradford, 2020).

Sharp power is a newer concept that denotes the manipulative and disinformation techniques of authoritarian regimes, used to undermine public opinion, destabilise democratic processes, and infiltrate the information space of target countries. This is power that is not based on legitimacy or persuasion but on deception, secrecy, coercion, and manipulation. Examples can be found in Russian and Chinese campaigns aimed at spreading propaganda through state-controlled media, infiltration organisations, or online botnets. Sharp power primarily threatens vulnerable segments of society where media literacy or trust in traditional institutions is absent (Walker, 2018; Walker et al., 2020).

Connectivity power, or power through control over connections and infrastructure, represents the capacity to shape and influence global chains—logistical, technological, financial, or communication, that are fundamental to the functioning of the globalised world (Leonard, 2021). This power is demonstrated, for example, in the issue of dependence on semiconductors from Taiwan, access to submarine cables, the dominance of cloud platforms run by American companies, or the influence of China’s Belt and Road Initiative. In this context, the European Union realises that without control over critical infrastructure (e.g., 5G networks, digital identities, satellite systems), it cannot be truly strategically autonomous. Connectivity power thus links technological sovereignty with geopolitical standing.

These new forms of power illustrate that contemporary power is increasingly asymmetric, distributed, and less visible than it was in the era of bipolarity. They also show that 21st-century power lies less in holding territory and more in the capacity to shape the flow of information, create narratives, and manage dependencies. For the European Union, this necessitates developing instruments for strategic communication, technological security, and democratic resilience as key pillars of its security and foreign policy.

As follows from the preceding chapters, hybrid threats represent a synthesis of geopolitical rivalry, technological dependence, and narrative competition, manifesting primarily in the grey zone between peace and open conflict. The aforementioned new dimensions of power are therefore crucial, especially in the analysis of hybrid threats, which involve the exploitation of interconnectedness, technological dependence, or social vulnerabilities with the aim of weakening an opponent without direct confrontation. In this sense, hybrid action becomes the “power of the narrative”, the capacity to influence what we perceive as true, safe, or dangerous (Rid, 2020; Krishnan, 2024).

Simultaneously, the traditional dichotomy between hard and soft power, which proves analytically insufficient, is being questioned. As Lukes (2021) points out, the most effective form of power is one that operates subtly, without the use of violence, that is, power that shapes preferences, normalises interests, and suppresses alternative options. In this light, current great power strategies increasingly combine economic tools, technological control, narrative dominance, and targeted repressive measures, which demand a new theoretical framework for understanding so-called hybrid power (Cooley & Nexon, 2020; Ivančík & Nečas, 2025).

The concept of authority is also undergoing a crisis and reconfiguration. In the postmodern global order, authority is increasingly distributed among state and non-state actors, with the legitimisation of power bound not only to national sovereignty but also to expertise, representation of interests, and effectiveness of performance. The rise of international regulatory bodies, global platforms (e.g., Big Tech), and scientific

authorities during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, points to the growing significance of so-called technocratic and post-territorial authority (Zürn, 2017).

This development has serious consequences for the democratic control of power. The shift of authority outside traditional political institutions, especially into the realm of algorithmic governance, cross-border standards, or artificial intelligence, weakens the capacity of citizens to influence decision-making. Therefore, there is an increasing discussion about the need for a re-democratisation of global governance, which would ensure that authority is not merely effective but also accountable and controllable (Deitelhoff & Daase, 2021; Dase et al., 2023).

These theoretical shifts are not merely abstract concepts; they have immediate consequences for political practice and the strategic decision-making of the European Union. The transformation of the concepts of power, authority, and competition has fundamental implications for the strategic thinking of the European Union and its security policy. In an environment where power is increasingly less tied to territory and increasingly interconnected with technology, data, and normative influence, Europe must learn to operate in a "fluid" security space—a space where hybrid instruments intersect with geopolitical ambitions, and where the boundaries between war, peace, and internal and external security are blurring (Helwig & Sinkkonen, 2022; Rosberg, 2025).

For the EU, this means that strategic autonomy cannot be built exclusively on military strength but must include the capacity to define norms, shape narratives, control access to technologies, and protect democratic integrity from external interference. In this sense, autonomy equates to strategic maturity—the capacity to act independently, but not in isolation; the capacity to withstand pressure, but also to co-create the rules of coexistence within the global system (Helwig & Sinkkonen, 2022; Fiott, 2025).

Equally important is that power and authority in the European space are no longer solely a matter for states, but increasingly a matter for networks, platforms, expertise, and transnational actors. It is therefore necessary to fundamentally rethink the security doctrines themselves, which are still based on the assumptions of the Westphalian system. The EU must learn to exercise networked power, a resilient strategy, and reflexive authority that is not only strong but also trustworthy and inclusive (Anghel, 2025; Adriaensen et al., 2025).

Finally, the concept of competition can no longer be reduced to great power rivalry. In an era of globally distributed risks, competition is increasingly a matter of values, reputation, and trust—factors that are advanced not by force, but by a consistent political culture, legitimacy, and the capacity to persuade (Mazzar et al., 2022). In this space, Europe can hold a comparative advantage if it manages to harmonise its value heritage with a pragmatic strategy for linking power, authority, and interests.

Conclusion

The contemporary international reality, shaped by increasing power rivalry, multipolar competition, and strategic uncertainty, presents a fundamental challenge to the traditional understanding of the relationship between politics and security. As this article demonstrates, this is an environment where security can no longer be reduced to the military dimension, nor can politics be limited to the classical instruments of state power. Instead, a profound transformation of the very foundations of the international order is taking place, in which geopolitical interests, technological dependence, normative struggles, and hybrid forms of action intersect.

The analysis showed that globalised multipolar competition changes the logic of security from a defensive framework to a permanent process of strategic rivalry, in which instruments of power are dispersed across military, economic, technological, and informational domains. Concepts such as *weaponised interdependence*, *connectivity power*, and *hybrid power* illustrate that control over connections, norms, and narratives is becoming as important as traditional military capabilities and capacities. In this environment, security becomes a fluid and permanently securitised category, extending into nearly all areas of public policy.

Within this transformation, the European Union finds itself in a particularly ambivalent position. On the one hand, it is exposed to rising pressure stemming from increasing great power rivalry and vulnerabilities arising from asymmetric dependencies; on the other, it seeks to preserve its normative identity based on multilateralism,

the rule of law, and democratic values. The pursuit of strategic autonomy, therefore, is not an isolationist project but a reaction to the realisation that openness without adequate geopolitical capacity can lead to a loss of strategic operational capability.

The article also demonstrated that the concepts of power and authority have undergone a fundamental reconfiguration in recent years. Power is increasingly linked to the capacity to shape rules, standards, and preferences, while authority disperses outside the framework of traditional state sovereignty—into the sphere of expertise, technocratic regimes, and transnational networks. This development significantly complicates the democratic control of power and places new, heightened demands on the legitimisation of political decision-making in the security sphere.

From the European Union's perspective, this means that strategic autonomy cannot be understood exclusively as a matter of building military capabilities and capacities. It is a broader project of strategic maturity that involves the capacity to create and regulate the technological and economic environment, protect the information space, build social resilience, and advance norms within the global system without falling into the logic of purely power-based competition. Autonomy in this sense does not mean separating from the world but the capacity to act independently under conditions of interconnectedness.

Finally, this article contributes to academic discussion by highlighting the need to overcome the binary divisions between hard and soft power, between internal and external security, or between cooperation and competition. European security in the 21st century is being formed in a space where these dichotomies are increasingly less analytically useful. The future relevance of the European Union as a security actor will depend on its ability to integrate values, interests, and new forms of power into a coherent and democratically legitimate strategy for operating under conditions of escalating multipolar competition, great power rivalry, and global uncertainty.

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