

# A STRATEGIC FEASIBILITY TEST:

## IS THE OLD EUROPEAN DREAM OF PEACEFUL MULTILATERALISM DEAD?

Miriam Katharina Heß  
Roderick Parkes  
Florence Schimmel  
Elisabeth Suh



# CENTRE FOR SECURITY, DIPLOMACY AND STRATEGY

CSDS IN DEPTH

NOVEMBER 2022

Miriam Katharina Heß  
Roderick Parkes  
Florence Schimmel  
Elisabeth Suh



BRUSSELS SCHOOL OF GOVERNANCE

CENTRE FOR SECURITY,  
DIPLOMACY AND STRATEGY

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
EVIDENCE OF THE EXISTENCE OF AN ALTERNATIVE PATH	5
FOUR IDEAS FOR AN ALTERNATIVE FUTURE: SPELLING OUT ASSUMPTIONS	7
ASSESSMENT: IS IT VIABLE FOR THE EU TO INVEST IN FIVE MEANS, FOUR POWERS, AND THREE REGIONS?	12
CONSEQUENCES: WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN FOR THE EU'S "STRATEGIC AUTONOMY"?	13

## Abstract

Any big strategic shift requires due diligence by the EU. Given the war in Ukraine and gridlock in global institutions, mainstream opinion in Europe expects the world to polarise, forcing the EU to decouple itself (or at least diversify strongly away from) a China-led bloc of authoritarian regimes and invest more heavily in coercive forms of international interaction in support of the United States. But there are still sceptical voices, not least in Germany. To them, the diagnosis of a “new Cold War” seems deterministic and might underplay the scope of traditional EU attempts to localise and regulate power politics. These sceptics are yet to flesh out an alternative path, and yet that should be the core of any due diligence exercise. Agnostic about whether the EU should brace itself for bipolarity, we here test the feasibility of what we term “the German alternative”.

The evidence does indeed show that globalisation is giving way to contestation and confrontation, and the EU must take a ruthless eye to its past assumptions about the path of future progress. Global bipolarity is of course one path for world affairs – but not the only one. Global order is currently structured around messy multipolarity. We explore an alternative focused on building (inter-)regional norms of mutual constraint. In judging the feasibility and desirability of this path we focus less on “passive” indicators – global megatrends – than on identifying political opportunities for the EU as an upper-middle power to actively steer events. We do find scope for the EU to localise and regulate power politics, exploiting the vulnerabilities of China, Russia, and the US when operating in each other’s neighbourhoods. But it is harder to fulfil this than to line up behind the United States.

## Introduction

Russia's aggression against Ukraine is being described as the opening salvo in a "new Cold War", this time between a China-led bloc of autocracies and a US-led bloc of democracies. The "original" Cold War was a battle between two great powers who emerged from a world war vying for global hegemony, and it played out over the Eurasian landmass and in multiple world regions, with the Soviet Union challenging the US on its flanks in Latin America and Western Europe, and the US challenging the Soviet Union on its flanks in South and East Asia. Both sides worked through local client regimes to establish their exclusive spheres of influence, meaning that global order as a whole became polarised, from top to bottom. Russia's current war echoes this familiar theme as Russia asserts "its" sphere of influence. But this time Moscow finds itself in the role of client regime: Russia has (grudgingly) coordinated with President Xi of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in pursuit of a new global order aimed against the US and West.<sup>1</sup>

The European Union evidently needs to adapt to a new world. True, it was set up amidst the competitive geopolitics of the Cold War, but with the very local mission to prevent the re-emergence of power politics in Western Europe – to prevent Germany from dominating smaller neighbours. EU integration created a regional market to mutualise the fuels of war – coal, steel, and youthful populations. From the 1970s, the EU both deepened and expanded the reach of its internal market. It purposefully created cross-border dependencies, and regulated issues of power politics as if they were issues of domestic policy, with a parliament and commission. It also positioned itself as a third way between the US and Soviet Union with its doctrine of "hot peace" (as opposed to cold war) and technical "spheres of expertise" (as opposed to geographic spheres of influence). It claimed to be using its reputation for good governance to overcome nascent conflicts and cross-border tensions.<sup>2</sup>

Today's EU is under pressure from the US – and from within – to finally acknowledge the global responsibilities that come with its wealth and power. For decades focused on itself, and on finding sui generis solutions to European problems, the EU today finds that it has accrued all the attributes of an upper middle power – a large population and territory, a sizeable domestic market which controls certain key technologies and a sphere of influence to defend in the form of "Wider Europe" (Eastern and south-eastern Europe). Many EU governments perceive that EU integration was at best self-indulgent, at worst greedy, made possible thanks to the US's readiness to play a security role in Europe. It is now the EU's duty to cut negative economic dependencies and turn Wider Europe into a theatre for the West to deter the PRC from dangerous acts in the Indo-Pacific and elsewhere.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ulrich Jochheim, "China-Russia Relations: A Quantum Leap?" European Parliamentary Research Service, March 2022, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/729349/EPRS\\_BRI\(2022\)729349\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/729349/EPRS_BRI(2022)729349_EN.pdf); and Stuart Lau, "China's Xi Gives Most Direct Backing to Putin Since Invasion". Politico, June 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/china-xi-give-most-direct-backing-putin-invasion-ukraine/>.

<sup>2</sup> Anu Bradford, *The Brussels Effect: How the European Union Rules the World*, Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2020, chapter 1.

## Evidence of the existence of an alternative path

We do not refute any of these assumptions per se. But before Europeans undertake any major strategic shift, basic due diligence behoves them to test counter-theses. This means looking beyond the unique historic experience of the Cold War and its echoes in the current war in Ukraine: rather than being on a predetermined course, power politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is clearly still in flux, and there may be scope for the EU to bend the future in its direction – towards the creative kinds of doctrine it developed during the Cold War. True, decoupling is a possibility and likely cheaper for the EU than expected.<sup>3</sup> But the question remains: is embracing a new Cold War better than the alternatives? In this paper we explore the possibility that the EU's traditional "European method" of addressing power politics could now make a useful and systemic contribution to the reform of global relations.

The "new Cold War" is supposedly characterised by a strong confrontation highly centred around two poles on either side of the Pacific; an ideological struggle between Eastern-style autocracy and Western-style democracy. Trends in international affairs may indeed point in this direction. But the current global (dis)order displays the following attributes:

- Regions are today the primordial arena for interactions between major global actors, as shown by Russia's attempt to re-establish a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, not to mention China's apparent assessment of Russia's actions there for its own power within its own backyard, the Indo-Pacific, and the United States' assessment of what committing to European security might mean for its own ability to counter China in Asia. There are even signs of regional integration gaining traction where threat perceptions converge, for example in the Indo-Pacific where the smaller partners within the hub-and-spokes network of alliances with the US strengthen security cooperation with their peers.
- We count four powers with the ability and/or aspiration to shape global affairs – the US, China, Russia, and the EU – and in some ways there is a trend towards more not fewer, as India also re-emerges and populous countries like Brazil, South Africa, Mexico, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Cambodia abstained from the April 2022 vote to suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council. Power today relies not just on classical attributes like military or industrial power, but also on geographic and technical reach. Importantly, all four powers are actors that are present in each world region with different levels of leverage and intensity.
- When it comes to the means of interaction between these actors, the state is certainly back after decades in which non-state actors and market solutions played an unusually large role, and backsliding has indeed been happening for years, as evidenced by a trend towards everything from lawfare to open warfare by revisionist powers like Russia and China.<sup>4</sup> But this confrontational behaviour is relative: it sometimes reflects legitimate grievances about the behaviour of North American and Western European states and their locked-in advantages within what Western governments call the rules-based order.

<sup>3</sup> Clemens Fuest, Lisandra Flach, Florian Dorn, and Lisa Scheckenhofer, *Geopolitische Herausforderungen und ihre Folgen für das deutsche Wirtschaftsmodell*, Vereinigung der Bayerischen Wirtschaft e. V., München, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Andres B. Munoz Mosquera and Sascha Dov Bachmann, "Lawfare in Hybrid Wars: The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Warfare". *Journal of International Humanitarian Legal Studies*, 7: 2016, 63-87.

If these trends are true, it does point to a distinct choice. The EU could indeed line up behind the US, in an alliance of democratic (and semi-democratic) states, to protect the advantages locked into the Western-dominated rules-based order against individual challengers which neither represent peer competitors to the US nor together amount to a cohesive alliance against the West and pick them off individually – and this option is eminently feasible given that there is in fact no “alliance of autocracies”. It is also quite legitimate, if not quite as noble as it might at first appear. Or the EU might seek out demand for its traditional style of intervention, its regional integration processes – and above all its foundational task of curbing force to the benefit of the vulnerable. We assess that there is scope for the latter.

- The worldwide spread of confrontational means and the wide geographic stretch of big powers comes at the cost of smaller states everywhere, and they would have a strong interest in credible EU-style norm-setting to regulate and blunt the use of force. But the same vulnerability to confrontation and power politics also applies to the big powers when they are operating “out of area” – trying to operate and build partnerships in regions far from home and in another’s “sphere of influence”. Big powers can also be small, therefore, and the EU’s expertise lies in exploiting this fact in order to press them to accept constraints on the use of force.

By identifying where big powers like the US, China, Russia, or India are exposed to the kinds of confrontational behavior they usually mete out to others, the EU could start processes of norm-setting, restraining the use of force and trying to move states that might ordinarily compete towards common goals. This would not necessarily occur directly by regulating the use of force (e.g. use of arms, aggressive cyber capabilities, disinformation, lawfare), but by triggering integration in a related policy field which has a strong constraining effect. The US might remain the EU’s closest ally in this by default, but Brussels would need to diversify beyond the US, as well as working sympathetically with autocratic regimes when they are vulnerable.

## Four ideas for an alternative future: spelling out assumptions

If there is indeed scope for the EU’s traditional forte of regionalising and regulating great power competition, then that would seem to leave the EU firmly inside its comfort zone – an attractive option for those EU governments resistant to change. So it is necessary to spell out the assumptions and conditions underpinning this scenario because this option might turn out to be a false friend, a strategic trap for the EU. By spelling out the assumptions that underpin the assessment that the EU could stick to its existing strengths we are testing whether these in fact entail unacceptable risk and compromise:

*1. All states now play in each other’s backyards, and they will continue to insist on this*

The first assumption is that states worldwide will continue to uphold relations with one another, even if China and the US use diplomatic, economic, and military pressure to demand they pick a side and decouple from one another.<sup>5</sup> The Cold War was unique for the level of commitment and allegiance within the respective blocs. Since 1989, most countries have built relations on their own terms, relations that consider their specific interests. Our assumption is that no incentive

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Kroenig, *The Return of Great Power Rivalry: Democracy versus Autocracy from the Ancient World to the U.S. and China*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

is great enough to encourage them to return to former times. Quite the reverse: many states are now looking beyond their Cold War-era “protector”. In Central Asia, Kazakhstan, usually thought to be strongly aligned with Russian politics and courses of action, is reaching out to other actors, to secure and pursue its own economic and political survival and agendas.<sup>6</sup> Pacific island nations and Southeast Asian states are engaged in a similar balancing act.<sup>7</sup>

Attempts by the US and China to (re)establish geographic “spheres of interest” certainly do exist, but both powers seem to acknowledge that they cannot recreate regions of absolute power, but only regions of relative power: almost every state can play around in almost everybody else’s “backyards”, and even smaller powers are assertive far from home. Near to the EU, for instance, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco are all re-emerging as regional powers and reasserting historical notions of their sphere of influence, sometimes stretching out across wide Turkic or Arab kinship lines. Deeply ambivalent in their international allegiances, these states play different “frenemies” off against one another in pursuit of a setup which suits their specific needs. They are also quite capable of triggering international interest alliances – of, say, major oil producers.<sup>8</sup>

Consequently, there remain barely any clear dividing lines or persistent fronts. Although the state is definitely back after decades of free market interaction between businesses (as well as NGOs, cities, individuals) this has not induced clear demarcations of sides or reduced the complexity of international affairs. Each region is tied up in a thick and complicated web of state-to-state relationships, be these issue-specific or transactional, and this constitutes the architecture of the international system nowadays. The Middle East, for instance, had been characterised by seemingly implacable enmities, but has given way to what has been called “liquid alliances”.<sup>9</sup> This is also true for the states making up the “West”. For example, the US under Donald Trump took a distinctly transactional approach, even within an alliance like NATO.<sup>10</sup>

*2. Revisionist states are not interested in conquest, they are simply contesting the accepted means of exchange*

The second assumption in fact takes the EU somewhat outside its comfort zone. What the EU perceives as hostile action by powers like China or Russia is often just the legitimate contestation of Western-dominated international relations. The polite *lingua franca* of the 1990s is now being politicised.<sup>11</sup> Globalisation after 1989 saw a huge intensification of interactions between states

6 Georgie Gotev, “Kasachstans Präsident besucht Brüssel, um Beziehungen mit EU zu stärken”. Euractiv, November 2021, <https://www.euractiv.de/section/eu-aussenpolitik/news/kasachstans-praesident-besucht-bruessel-um-beziehungen-mit-eu-zu-staerken/> and Martin Banks, “EU and Kazakhstan Aim to Forge ‘Ever Closer’ Relations”. EUREporter, June 2022, <https://www.eureporter.co/kazakhstan-2/2022/06/22/eu-and-kazakhstan-aim-to-forge-ever-closer-relations/>.

7 Jonathan Stromseth, “Don’t Make Us Choose: Southeast Asia in the Throes of US-China Rivalry”. The Brookings Institution, 2019, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/FP\\_20191009\\_dont\\_make\\_us\\_choose.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/FP_20191009_dont_make_us_choose.pdf).

8 Muhammad Nadeem Mirza, Shaikat Ayub, “Sino-Russian Competitive Collaboration for the Central Asian Sphere of Influence”. *Trames: Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 25 (4): 2021 437-450.

9 Eduard Soler i Lecha, “Liquid Alliances in the Middle East”. Barcelona Center for International Relations, March 2017, [https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication\\_series/notes\\_internacionales/n1\\_169/liquid\\_alliances\\_in\\_the\\_middle\\_east](https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/notes_internacionales/n1_169/liquid_alliances_in_the_middle_east).

10 T. Maregisi, “EU Policy towards Libya”. *Insight Turkey*, 22 (4) 2020: 29–40, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/26981714#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/26981714#metadata_info_tab_contents).

11 Bastian Giegerich, “Hybrid Warfare and the Changing Character of Conflict”. *Connections*, 15 (2) 2016: 65–72.

with little prior knowledge of one another, and so there was a need for a set of accepted “normal” practices. During the 1990s, a certain conformity about the types of means was established, on the promise that these forms of exchange would bring everyone inside the tent of peace and prosperity.<sup>12</sup> That no longer holds, mistrust is growing, and old Cold War mechanisms for building confidence no longer exist.

This second assumption thus relies on the idea that much aggressive behaviour can in fact be situated within the existing spectrum of forms of exchange. States’ toolbox to engage in international politics involves five broad means of interaction: a) military; b) geo-economic; c) diplomatic; d) proxy (non-state actors); and e) non-ascribable. Each of these five categories was mostly thought to be effectively regulated by international agreements, institutions, and formal or informal conventions. But each has traditionally had a confrontational side, and this is becoming clear again. Accordingly, we note:

- the decreased role of civilian/nonmilitary means and the increasing role of military means;
- the decreased influence of global trade bodies and the increasing role of economic statecraft for national political objectives;
- the decreased credibility of norms and diplomatic agreements and the increasing role of “lawfare”;
- the decreased role of bottom-up decentralised solutions and the increasing role of non-state actors as state proxies; and
- the decreased role of predictable and signalled tactics and increasing aggression and conflict below the threshold of war, sometimes with notions of ambiguity.

Status quo powers like the US and EU today tend to treat such confrontational behaviour as an unprovoked attack on the rules-based order. They are afraid of losing the privileges baked into the current international system. Yet during the early 2000s the EU spent much time agonising precisely over the fact that the “rules-based order” and its clubs and rules, were dominated by Western governments and so could legitimately be contested by (r-)emerging powers like the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). A little of that old empathy and self-awareness might today pay dividends: if the EU condemns such behaviour out of hand it will disregard the costs this contestation entails for the protagonists too. Conflictual modes of interaction such as lawfare and hybrid warfare<sup>13</sup> will increasingly prove debilitating even for challenger powers, notably those like the PRC which have grown powerful on the back of stable international norms.

<sup>12</sup> Colin Gray, “Clausewitz Rules, OK? The Future Is the Past – with GPS”. *Review of International Studies*, 25 (5) 1999: 161-182.

<sup>13</sup> Andres B. Munoz Mosquera and Sascha Dov Bachmann, “Lawfare in Hybrid Wars”, *op. cit.*

*3. Each of the world's big powers will find themselves vulnerable and will be open to constraints on behaviour*

The third, and key, assumption is that each of the large powers has a stake in curbing the range of means available to others – and themselves – because they occasionally find themselves the targets of violent confrontation. If the EU can successfully identify where some of the usual bullies are on the receiving end of bad behaviour, it will be able to spin new norms acceptable even to the bullies themselves. The obvious focus here would be situations where one of the bigger powers find themselves unexpectedly in the position of a smaller one – when they are operating “out of area”, in an alien geography or technical field. On such occasions, the bigger powers will be vulnerable. This provides a potential opening for the EU to find a broader coalition of allies looking to soften the power play in that field.

The obvious drawback here is the prohibitive degree of information-processing and diplomatic engagement required from the EU to seize on political opportunities to bind big powers. It is already a simplification to list the typical means of inter-state communication in just five categories as we did above (diplomatic engagement, economic instruments, military means, non-state proxies, and digital technologies). Out in the real world the range and intermingling of these five means are much broader, and they will vary across each region and technical field, making it hard for the EU and willing partners to introduce clear and comprehensive conventions. Moreover, identifying the powers with a sufficient stake – and legitimacy – in a certain region or technical field to bind themselves and others to new rules as to how to interact is a tall task for the EU and its already stretched diplomatic resources.

Nevertheless, simplicity can be deceptive here, and there are dangers in plumping for a solution just because it seems straightforward. The EU is facing a world in which all states are engaged in highly ambivalent forms of behaviour and all courses of action have unknown consequences, even under the scenario of clear-cut global bipolarity. Europeans risk seeking refuge in the idea of Cold War-style bipolarity because it offers an attractive reduction of complexity, particularly when it comes to relationship-building. It is understandable that the EU would seek a binary choice about treating a state as an ally and rival. EU governments have acknowledged the need to reach out to semi-autocratic powers in the wake of the Russian invasion, belying the notion of competing alliances of autocrats and democrats.<sup>14</sup>

*4. If the EU tries to regulate other world regions, it will need to welcome foreign powers in its own backyard*

The final assumption is that some focus and simplification are possible under the multipolar/multilateral scenario, and the EU can afford to focus its efforts at regulation and cooperation on just a handful of world regions. There are at least 10 major world regions. But three stand out – the Indo-Pacific, Central Asia, and Wider Europe. Each of these regions is sandwiched between two of the four powers, and each of the four powers is present in each. Furthermore, there is some flux in each of the regions:

- **Indo-Pacific:** The US recently affirmed the Indo-Pacific, rather than Eurasia, as its strategic center of gravity – and rightly so, considering the region’s relevance for supply chains,

<sup>14</sup> Tobias Bunde and Sophie Eisentraut, “Zeitenwende for the G7: Insights from the Munich Security Index Special G7 Edition”. Munich Security Brief 3 2022, [https://securityconference.org/assets/02\\_Dokumente/01\\_Publikationen/2022/MunichSecurityBrief\\_ZeitenwendefortheG7.pdf](https://securityconference.org/assets/02_Dokumente/01_Publikationen/2022/MunichSecurityBrief_ZeitenwendefortheG7.pdf).

trade, and critical technologies.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the US is likely to increase its efforts in order to outcompete China, even if only with a narrow margin.<sup>16</sup> As the rivalry intensifies, the clash of Chinese and US hegemonic aspirations will determine regional politics. The EU will be able to benefit from cooperation with states in the region while Russia is likely to lose relative influence and lose its economic appeal, mainly because of heavy sanctions.

- Central Asia: China is likely to step in and boost its economic influence here, nudging aside a Russia that remains embroiled on its own Western flank. The EU and the US are unlikely to change their relative power position in Central Asia, with the EU remaining on top of a US which has always struggled to develop a meaningful presence in the region. The EU will be deemed the most likely actor providing humanitarian and development aid in the region, since Chinese aid is seen to come with strings attached and Russia has no capability. After the chaos the withdrawal from Afghanistan caused, the US will remain the least influential (and wanted) actor in the region.
- Wider Europe: Prior to its attack on Ukraine, Russia was becoming the most influential actor on the continent – not because cooperation is sought by Europeans and Americans but precisely because Russia cannot be approached with solely diplomatic efforts anymore. The US now leads efforts in delivering weapons, intelligence, and other aid to Ukraine such as the sanctions regime and global censure. However, since NATO members will not join the conflict in fear of the nuclear face-off, the limits of US engagement are also quite clear. China will continue to pursue its tactic of slowly but steadily filling gaps that the EU is unwilling or unable to fill, making it only in relation the least deciding actor.

These three regions are key to Europe's economic and political future, giving it the motivation to seek order there. Central Asia is important for Europe's future energy security, being rich in natural resources, including hydrocarbons and rare earths. And of course, the Indo-Pacific is crucial for European exports, supply chains, critical technologies, and security partnerships. As such, the EU has a strong interest in ensuring that powers like China and Russia behave cooperatively, even in their own backyards. But there are serious trade-offs in this regional approach. The EU must itself take an inclusive spirit to a sphere which it has traditionally looked upon as its own, Wider Europe. Moreover, rather than engaging in its southern neighbourhood, where it faces serious security threats from Russia and China, it would focus on binding Russia, China, and the US in other key regions, and then applying these in the south.

These three key regions are also where the EU might step in to regulate the use of the five means of inter-state action we identify, and try to establish a new non-antagonistic lingua franca between governments. Figure 1 represents the outcome of group analysis<sup>17</sup> on trends in each means and region. The higher the number, the more intense the trend towards contestation in that particular means and region, and thus its negative influence on the conflict potential in that

<sup>15</sup> Remarks at the Shangri-La Dialogue by Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III (As Delivered), 11 June 2022: <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/3059852/remarks-at-the-shangri-la-dialogue-by-secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iii-a/>.

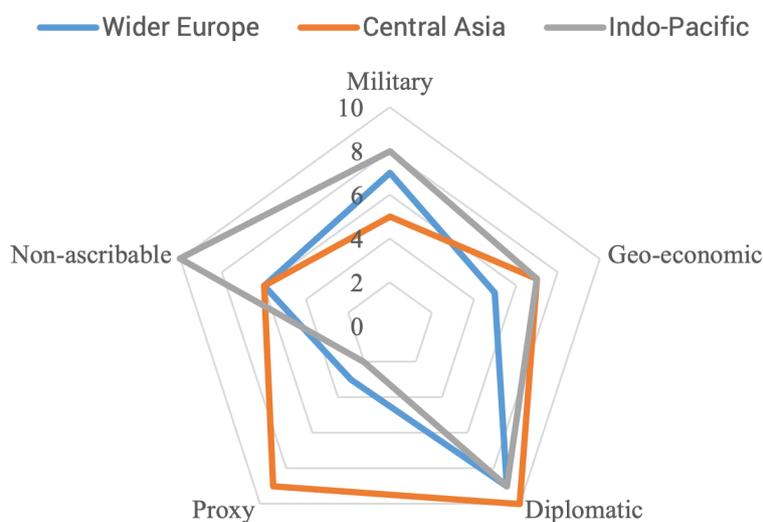
<sup>16</sup> "The Administration's Approach to the People's Republic of China", Speech by Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State, 26 May 2022: <https://www.state.gov/the-administrations-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>.

<sup>17</sup> The group analysis included interviews with up to 10 individuals based at the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP).

locality. In global terms, the trend across all regions and means is towards more confrontational behaviour. The EU’s perception of a breakdown in global governance is thus well-founded. But rather than being a reason for the EU to drop its traditional approach of seeking constraints on the use of force and adopting more robust and zero-sum modes of action for itself, this situation suggests that there could be demand amongst unexpected players – China, the US even Russia – for precisely this.

**Figure 1 – Five Means and Three Regions**

In which of the five means is there greatest trend towards confrontation in the respective regions?



**Assessment: is it viable for the EU to invest in five means, four powers, and three regions?**

Russia’s war in Ukraine presents the definitive wake-up call for the EU when it comes to global power politics. Mainstream voices are now pressing it to reduce its economic exposure to China and authoritarian countries that align with Beijing; deepen links with the US, including by investing in autonomous but supplementary European defence capabilities; build new geopolitical alliances with like-minded democracies via the US; “friendshore” its supply and value chains by moving these to partners; increase Europe’s exploitation (that is: processing and recycling) of its own energy sources and rare earths; and establish its eastern and southeastern neighbourhood as an exclusive area of responsibility, its prime contribution to the transatlantic alliance. Each of these components is currently being explored and costed by analysts.

But it is bad practice to embark on change without exploring alternatives – not least because it fails to win over critics who may harbour vague but attractive ideas that a cosier path is

possible.<sup>18</sup> We have done so here, based on the following four arguments:

- Counterargument 1: Thirty years of intense global market integration in fact militate against Cold War-style global dividing lines, blocs, or exclusive spheres of influence. Trade, diplomatic, and security links could well remain intense and complex.
- Counterargument 2: Big powers like the US and China may be back at the centre of global affairs but they are not hegemonic. Indeed, there are at least four big powers – the US, China, Russia, and the EU – with more to come.
- Counterargument 3: The “big four” will find themselves meddling in sensitive affairs in each other’s traditional spheres of influence and they will feel small when operating in an unfamiliar region and may be subject to force and confrontation; in that context, they will be open to some form of regulation.
- Counterargument 4: The EU can, in theory, attain a position of power in each major world region, getting buy-in for the regulation of force not only from small local states but also big states made to feel small and vulnerable because they are acting “out of area”.

Our analysis suggests that each of the three regions is showing different – and mutually complementary – trends as regards the use of confrontation and force in each of the five means (that is a) military; b) geo-economic; c) diplomatic; d) proxy (non-state actors); and e) non-ascribable). It also suggests that there is flux in the influence of each of the four powers in the three major focus regions, with most of the states losing power in their own backyard. In short, a basic mapping reveals scope for the kind of EU-led regional norm-building we envisage here. The analysis showed too, that the danger of sticking with a comfortable status quo is matched on the other side by the danger of embracing a seemingly simplistic alternative like global bipolarity. The specific German notion of *Wandel durch Handel* may have failed, for instance, but this was hardly a test case for engagement in general.

And yet, the broader analysis also shows that this alternative path is highly – perhaps prohibitively – complex, being reliant on a sequence of largely untested assumptions, and involving considerable compromise of the EU’s already stretched security and diplomatic resources – including giving up sole ownership of Wider Europe and turning its attention away from the southern neighbourhood. As such, this “German path” does not seem to offer a viable alternative for the EU. The task, rather than pursuing the course of multipolarity/multilateralism sketched out in this paper, will likely be to adapt the EU’s traditional strengths to a scenario in which international relations are indeed arranged around China and the US, but not along the lines of pure Cold-War style bipolarity. Links between states and regions will, for instance, remain intense and complex, and it will be important for the EU to focus on forms of interdependency that set the right incentives rather than links that bring toxic dependency.

---

<sup>18</sup> Stefan Mair, “Strategic Ties, Not Blocs: Why Germany Should Promote a Multipolar Order”/ 49security, 23 September 2022, <https://fourninesecurity.de/en/2022/09/23/why-germany-should-promote-a-multipolar-order>.

## Consequences: what does all this mean for the EU's "strategic autonomy"?

The Russian invasion of Ukraine brought armed conflict and territorial conquest to the borders of the EU and highlighted the importance of NATO membership for the EU and the bulk of its member states. Inevitably, and rightly, this has raised questions of whether Europeans are pulling their weight in the world, and in their own near abroad. Germany has increasingly weighed up such considerations by reference to the talismanic notion of EU "strategic autonomy", the independence of European politics from US decisions and the strength and cohesion of the European stance against Russia. Thus the Strategic Compass<sup>19</sup>, a strategy document from Member States focusing on security and defence and based on the first genuinely shared EU threat assessment, was approved by foreign affairs and defence ministers in March 2022. Its two-year drafting period was accompanied by the questions *if* and *how* the EU could achieve strategic autonomy.

What has become clear is that autonomy cannot be a synonym for independence. This is obvious in the scenario of global bipolarity, where Europe would remain largely dependent on the US, but pulling Europe's weight sufficiently to hedge against the chances of a political backlash in Washington against "European free-riding". From a German perspective, however, it is equally obvious when it comes to the "French alternative" to global bipolarity – investing in an independent European defence capability and establishing the EU as its own pole in a multipolar order. This might be the guiding idea behind EU strategic autonomy, but it would require mutual respect between nearby regional poles like Russia or the North African states. And, furthermore, it would also depend on political developments in France. If France's "invest in independent European defence" argument relies on the spectre of Donald Trump, the counterargument is eloquently made by the spectre of Le Pen.

From a German perspective there are no good options here – until, that is, we switch from a negative approach (autonomous from whom?) to a positive approach (autonomous to do what?). This is because we are not heading towards a straight re-run of the Cold War, and even in a bipolar scenario there will be considerable interdependency between regions of the kind we have sketched out here. An EU which makes the bold and positive choice to find a third path to exploit this inter-regionalism will gain sovereignty in its international modus operandi. It may also find allies it did not even know it had. Many African, Asian, and South American countries today remain non-aligned despite pressure to take sides in Russia's war.<sup>20</sup> They are not rallying to "Western liberalism" because of its perceived double standards, its record of simply disapplying constraints on the use of force when expedient, for instance in Iraq or Libya. Western interventions have destabilised their regions, and efforts by the EU to correct this and constrain power to the benefit of smaller players could increase Western credibility.

We have conceded that focusing on the "five means, four powers, three regions" would represent an untested gamble on the part of the EU, especially when weighed against the familiar option of bipolarity. And yet we have also argued that the familiar old scenario of bipolarity is precisely

<sup>19</sup> 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", Brussels, 21 March 2022, [https://www.satcen.europa.eu/keydocuments/strategic\\_compass\\_en3\\_web6298d4e4601f2a0001c0f871.pdf](https://www.satcen.europa.eu/keydocuments/strategic_compass_en3_web6298d4e4601f2a0001c0f871.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> International Crisis Group, "Reaffirming Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity at the UN", Commentary, 5 October 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/reaffirming-ukraines-sovereignty-and-territorial-integrity-un>.

that, a historical memory rather than a plausible future scenario. The most likely scenario for this decade is, rather, a mix of the two alternatives explored in this paper – bipolarity and multi-regionalism, with the EU having some niche capacity to tip the balance in one direction or the other. If this option of bi-polarity and multi-regionalism is attractive to Germany because it softens the pressure to choose sides, even if it means being marginalised in the process of lining up behind the chosen hegemon, this will apply to other states too.<sup>21</sup> Upholding international principles which non-aligned states profit from, and doing so with integrity, credibility and the acceptance of potential costs, would be more fruitful than offering them a choice between two disagreeable options, the US or China.<sup>22</sup>

---

21 Sven Biscop, “Imperial Preference”. Egmont Institute, October 2022, [https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2022/10/Sven-Biscop\\_PolicyBrief289.pdf?type=pdf](https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2022/10/Sven-Biscop_PolicyBrief289.pdf?type=pdf).

22 Ibid.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



### **Miriam Katharina Heß**

Miriam Katharina Heß has been a research fellow in the German Council of Foreign Relations' (DGAP) Security and Defense Program since January 2022. She works on a project on Islamist radicalisation and extremism in Europe's Chechen diaspora. Previously, Miriam worked on the project "Analysis of Trends and Developments in the Tertiary Prevention of Islamist Extremism" and for the Robert Bosch Center for Central and Eastern Europe, Russia, and Central Asia at DGAP. In her PhD project at the University of Leipzig, she is investigating the security rhetoric of terrorism in Russia and France in the context of securitization theory.



### **Roderick Parkes**

Since March 2021, Dr. Roderick Parkes has been a research director at DGAP. He also heads the Alfred von Oppenheim Center on the future of Europe, where he works on issues of European integration and the EU's role in the world. Over the past 15 years, Roderick has worked across Europe – in Brussels, Warsaw, Stockholm, and Paris – each time working for foreign policy think tanks.



### **Elisabeth Suh**

Elisabeth Suh has been a research fellow in DGAP's Security and Defense Program since June 2020. She works on a project on risk reduction and arms control in the Asia-Pacific region. Since 2020, Elisabeth has also been an associate PhD fellow at the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg. There, she analyses North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons and its related messaging in the context of bargaining vis-à-vis the United States. Previous stints include the German Institute for International and Security Affairs and the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt.



### **Florence Schimmel**

Florence Schimmel has been a research fellow in DGAP's Security and Defense Program since July 2020 after having been a programme assistant since September 2019. She currently works on stabilisation and the Peace-Security Nexus in German foreign policy and the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy. Previously, Florence worked on projects on the Strategic Compass and the EU's capabilities in civilian crisis management.

The Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy (CSDS) seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the key contemporary security and diplomatic challenges of the 21st century – and their impact on Europe – while reaching out to the policy community that will ultimately need to handle such challenges. Our expertise in security studies will seek to establish comprehensive theoretical and policy coverage of strategic competition and its impact on Europe, whilst paying particular attention to the Transatlantic relationship and the wider Indo-Pacific region. Diplomacy as a field of study will be treated broadly and comparatively to encompass traditional statecraft and foreign policy analysis, as well as public, economic and cultural diplomacy.

**[www.brussels-school.be/research/security-diplomacy-and-strategy](http://www.brussels-school.be/research/security-diplomacy-and-strategy)**



**The Brussels School of Governance is an alliance between the Institute for European Studies (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) and Vesalius College.**

Visitor's address:  
 Pleinlaan 5, 1050 Brussels, Belgium  
 Mailing address:  
 Pleinlaan 2, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

**[info\\_bsog@vub.be](mailto:info_bsog@vub.be)**  
**[www.brussels-school.be](http://www.brussels-school.be)**