The Ambiguity of the EU's Global Role: A Social Explanation of the Term 'Strategic Autonomy'

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The term strategic autonomy has become a major reference point in the debates on the EU as a global actor despite concerns of some Member States that worry about global decoupling signals. What explains the attractiveness and widespread use of the concept in the EU's policy debates? This article puts forward an explanation grounded in social factors and dynamics. It uses role theory to develop a hypothesis for the proliferation of the strategic autonomy concept in the debate on EU's global role. Based on this perceptive, the conflict between the EU's roles as a market-, normative-, and realist power is at the heart of the emergence of the strategic autonomy discourse. Rather than forcing the EU to adapt its role as an international actor, the reference to strategic autonomy allows for 'role ambiguity'. The article discusses this in light of the current debates on the 'geopolitical Commission', qualified majority voting (QMV) in the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), as well as in the area of defence. Whether the ambiguity – the lack of clarity and certainty the EU as a collective actor faces with regards to the enactment of its role – will prove to be constructive or destructive for its foreign policy remains still open.

Keywords: Strategic Autonomy, European Union, EU's Global Role, Role theory, Common Foreign and Security Policy, Common Security and Defence Policy, Normative Power, Market Power, Realist Power

1 INTRODUCTION[1]

Since the EU global strategy from 2016 that introduced the concept of 'strategic autonomy' in the EU policy debate, there has been no shortage of official policy documents or think tank analyses discussing the term.[2] The proliferation of the term in the foreign policy debates presents us with a puzzle. On the one hand, the notion of autonomy has been highly contested – some even argue 'toxic'[3] – in the

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discussions among Member States on Europe's future course. After all, 'autonomy' can easily be (mis)interpreted as distancing or decoupling and thus alienates those members for which a close transatlantic security partnership or a liberal international trade agenda is paramount. On the other hand, this did not stop the EU and its representatives to put the term at the centre of EU policy debates.

How can we explain the proliferent use of the strategic autonomy concept in the discussion of EU foreign policy despite its divisive effects? This article puts forward an explanation grounded in the constructivist approach of role theory. Rather than looking at the material factors of the debate, such as the EU's interdependencies in its security or trade relations, this article highlights the ideational process that pushes the strategic autonomy narrative to the forefront. The article is based on the observation that the EU is increasingly faced with a dissonance between different self-images as an international actor. In particular, it is unsure whether its external relations should be guided by its market-liberal principles, its norms and values, or – increasingly – by security concerns.

The EU's struggles between competing objectives as a market, normative or realist power are not a new development. Here, it is used to develop the hypothesis that the strategic autonomy discourse became popular as a result of this identity crisis. Because of its ambiguity, the idea of strategic autonomy can be used – and is used – in the justification of various policy objectives, whether they serve the EU's security interests, values, or economic position.

The article starts with a short introduction into role theory, which serves as a framework for this analysis. 'Role ambiguity' is introduced as a concept that describes the EU's uncertainty about which priorities, strategies and instruments are part of its role. The next section analyses the current role conflict of the EU between its market-, normative- and realist power conceptions. The competition between different narratives of the EU's global role is as salient as ever in the current discourse. The article then turns to discuss the external contestation of the EU's self-image, which is challenged by the crisis of multilateralism and the rules-based order, bilateral challenges from major powers, as well as by transnational trends, such as populism or technological disruption. In order to adapt to this contestation, the EU is in recent years introducing a geopolitical approach in its external relations. This includes a discussion of decision-making reforms in the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the deepening of its defence integration, as the section before the conclusion highlights. The article concludes that, the term 'strategic autonomy' is used to argue for policy-change across all ideational dimensions of EU foreign policy. Yet, the jury is still out whether the ambiguity of the term is constructive or destructive for the EU's ability to formulate a clearer strategy.

2   A SOCIAL EXPLANATION OF THE STRATEGIC AUTONOMY CONCEPT

The concept of strategic autonomy has its origin in the study of the EU's security and defence policy.[4] It is little surprising that the analytical perspective to analyse the EU's dependencies in the security field leans towards neo(realist) inspired explanations and focuses on the alliance politics between Europe and the US.[5] Lately, economic questions have increasingly moved into the focus of the strategic autonomy debate and have given weight to explanations grounded in network approaches or International Political Economy Theory.[6] In contrast, this article puts forward an explanation grounded in social factors and dynamics. It uses a role theoretical approach to develop a hypothesis for the proliferation of the strategic autonomy concept in the debate on EU foreign affairs.

Role theory, and its applications to the study of the EU as an international actor, starts from the assumption that the EU's activities can best be explained through its social context and interactions.[7] The popular analogy used to describe the approach likens the EU and other international actors to theatre actors on a stage that play a certain part according to their script, while trying to adapt to the expectations of an audience.[8] It is important to note that according to the concept, roles are not fixed and instead develop through a constant process of social interaction between different actors.[9] The analysis of the EU as an international actor thus includes studying its own role conception.[10] Here the question is, how the EU perceives its own identity as an international actor and what course of action it derives from that. In addition, the contestation of the EU's role by elites and interest groups is in the focus.

The theory explains change as a result of role conflicts that either emerge between competing self-conceptions of an actor, or as a result of a misfit between the self-conception and the external contestation. Role conflicts lead to a reflection on the self-conception of an actor and a possible adaptation of its role.[11]

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4   N. Helwig, *EU Strategic Autonomy: A Reality Check for Europe's Global Agenda*, FIIA Working Paper, 199 (2020).

5   J. Howorth, *Strategic Autonomy and EU-NATO Cooperation: Threat or Opportunity for Transatlantic Defence Relations?*, 40(5) J. Eur. Integ. 523–537 (2018).

6   Cross reference to T. Poutala et al. & T. Gehrke in this special issue.

7   L. Aggestam, *Role Theory and European Foreign Policy: A Framework of Analysis*, in *The European Union's Role in International Politics* 11–29 (O. Elgström & M. Smith eds, Routledge 2006).

8   N. Koenig, *Between Conflict Management and Role Conflict: The EU in the Libyan Crisis*, 23(3) Eur. Sec. 250–269 (2014).

9   S. Harnisch, *Role Theory: Operationalization of Key Concepts*, in *Role Theory in International Relations: Approaches and Analyses* 7–35 (S. Harnisch, C. Frank & H. W. Maull eds, Routledge 2011).

10   K. J. Holsti, *National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy*, 14(3) Int'l Stud. Q. 233–309 (1970).

11   C. Cantir & J. Kaarbo, *Contested Roles and Domestic Politics: Reflections on Role Theory in Foreign Policy Analysis and IR Theory*, 8(1) Foreign Pol'y Analysis 5–24 (2012).

This article will analyse to what extent the emergence and proliferation of the term strategic autonomy can be understood as a result of this social adaptation process. The analysis is based on peer-reviewed literature, the discourse reflected in expert analyses (e.g., from think tanks) as well as official documents and speeches. This led to the identification and reconstruction of three prominent roles of the EU as a market, normative and realist power. The argument is that, rather than triggering a role adaptation of the EU as an international actor in the sense of a strategic reorientation, the strategic autonomy concept increases the EU's role ambiguity. While 'role ambiguity' is an established term in sociological literature,[12] it is in this article for the first time applied to the EU's international role. The term is here used to describe the lack of clarity and certainty the EU as a collective actor faces with regards to the enactment of its role. It differs from the concept of role conflict. While role conflict occurs when an actor is faced with inconsistent or incompatible demands, role ambiguity is the resulting uncertainty about which priorities, strategies and instruments are part of its role. It is therefore a result of a role conflict, which did not lead to a conclusive role adaptation of an international actor. In the case at hand, the emergence of role ambiguity is reflected in the vague nature of the strategic autonomy concept, which allows for multiple interpretations of what the EU should do to adapt to a more challenging international environment.

3   THE EU'S IDENTITY CRISIS

An important aspect of the debate on the EU's international role and with regards to the pursuit of strategic autonomy is the EU's self-conception in international politics. Only through a certain perception of itself of being separate from 'others', can the EU claim to follow an autonomous foreign policy.[13] However, the question of what the word 'European' in the European strategic autonomy discourse refers to, remains contested. In the following, I sketch out what could be labelled as an identity crisis of the EU, as the bloc is neither certain of the roots of its self-image nor the policies that should follow from it. Instead, several versions of the EU's narrative exist, which are all reflected to some degree in the concept of strategic autonomy (see Table 1).

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[12]   *See* e.g., B. J. Biddle, *Recent Developments in Role Theory*, 12 An. Rev. Soc. 67–92 (1986); R. Kahn, *Organizational Stress: Studies in Role Conflict and Ambiguity* (Wiley 1964).

[13]   B. Rumelili, *Constructivism and the Role of the 'Other' in EU External Action*, in *The External Action of the European Union: Concepts, Approaches, Theories* 197–201 (S Gstöhl & S. Schunz eds, Red Globe Press 2021); M. Siddi, *National Identities and Foreign Policy in the European Union. The Russia Policy of Germany, Poland and Finland,* ECPR Press (2017).

Table 1   The EU's Self-Conception and Strategic Autonomy

	Market Power	*Normative Power*	*Realist Power*
Source of identity	Single market	EU's distinct values	Structural shifts
Strategic auton–omy from	Coercion/unfair trade practices	Authoritarianism, human rights abuse	Military dependence on US
Strategic auton–omy for	Managing risks in global economy Promoting norms through trade	Protecting 'European way of life' Diffuse norms in external relations	Protecting the EU without need for outside help
Related concepts	Open Strategic Autonomy	European civilization	Capacity to Act
Key debates	Trade liberalization vs. promotion of norms/security interests	European vs. uni–versal norms	Atlanticism vs Europeanism

The self-identification of the EU as a *market power* goes back to the roots of the integration process as an economic project. According to Damro, the EU's identity is closely linked to the development of its single market.[14] Not only, is the integration of the EU project most advanced in the economic sphere, the EU also represents the world's largest trading bloc. Both, the regulatory competences of the European Commission, as well as the ability to project power through trade relations globally, makes the single market the defining element of the EU's external action. Through its interaction with others, the EU attempts to externa–lize its market-related policies and regulations.[15]

The centrality of economic policies and the EU's focus on using its economic clout is also reflected in the strategic autonomy discourse. The best example of the projection of its self-image as a market power on external policies is the European Commission development of the 'Open Strategic Autonomy' concept.[16] In the revision of its trade policy, the EU highlights openness on the one hand, i.e., its liberal market-based principles. Accordingly, the message is that the EU wants to

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[14] C. Damro, *Market Power Europe*, 19(5) J. Eur. Pub. Pol'y 682–699 (2012).

[15] A. R. Young, *Europe as a Global Regulator? The Limits of EU Influence in International Food Safety Standards*, 21(6) J. Eur. Pub. Pol'y 904–922 (2014); A. Bradford, *The Brussels Effect: How the European Union Rules the World* (Oxford University Press 2020).

[16] *See* e.g., European Commission, *Trade Policy Review – An Open, Sustainable and Assertive Trade Policy*, COM(2021) 66 final (Brussels, 18 Feb. 2021).

keep trade barriers low and promote rules–based international trade. On the other hand, the goal of the Commission is to address some of the EU's dependencies in strategic sectors and to fight back against unfair trade and investment practices of third states.[17] An important focus is on the reform of the World Trade Organization, which reflects the market power narrative and the EU's tendency to externalize its market policies.

However, the EU's approach as a market power is more than just trying to globally export its marked–based model. The strategic autonomy debate signals that the EU's self-image as a market power is slowly shifting. The announcement of Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to lead a 'geopolitical Commission' indicates that the EU is willing to use its leverage on economic and trade matters more distinctively in the pursuit of political goals.[18] Instead of focusing on trade liberalization and reciprocity, non-trade policy objectives move into the spotlight. Such as the enforcement of labour rights in the EU's international supply chains, or carbon neutrality in the production of imports. Strategic autonomy, and the management of global interdependencies, extended to become more than just a defensive strategy in a more economically competitive environment and also started to include normative elements of protecting and promoting the EU 'way of life'.[19]

Indeed, the strategic autonomy debate raises longstanding questions regarding the EU's identity as a *normative power*. The concept underlines the ideational history and features of the EU as an entity that helped to overcome violent conflicts on the continent and enshrined the ideas of peace, liberty, democracy, and the rule of law in its 'acquis communitaire'. The centrality of these norms to the European context and the ambition to diffuse them in their external relations, separates the EU from other international actors.[20] The EU's identity from this perspective goes way beyond the attractiveness and power of its market. Instead, the EU actively defines what it means to be European in its relations with others, for example towards accession candidates.[21]

The question of Europe's distinct normative base reappeared in the discussion on European strategic autonomy. In particular French President Emmanuel Marcon, one of the biggest proponents of a more autonomous approach of the EU, repeatedly highlighted the distinct ideological basis of the European project as

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[17]   T. Gehrke in this special issue.
[18]   S. Meunier & K. Nicolaïdis, *The European Union as a Conflicted Trade Power*, 13(6) J. Eur. Pub. Pol'y 906–925 (2006).
[19]   European Commission, *2021 Strategic Foresight Report: The EU's Capacity and Freedom to Act*, COM (2021) 750 final (Brussels 8 Sept. 2021).
[20]   I. Manners, *Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?*, 40 J. Com. Mkt. Stud. 235–258 (2002).
[21]   B. Laffan, *The European Union and Its Institutions as 'Identity Builder'*, in *Transnational Identities: Becoming European in the EU* (R. Herrmann & T. M. Risse eds, Rowman & Littlefield 2004).

a starting point for his vision of a more sovereign Europe.[22] Going even further, he called for the promotion of the 'European civilization', which he sees as distinct from the 'American' and 'Chinese' civilization.[23] In her sharp critique of the emerging European identity narrative, Rosa Balfour pointed out that if 'European sovereignty is the political embodiment of the "European civilization"; strategic autonomy is the policy outcome'.[24] This interpretation of strategic autonomy as an attempt to pursuit identity politics and pit 'European' values against those of others provoked criticism. Balfour raised the questions whether EU foreign policy goals are not better served, when values, such as human rights, are seen as 'universal' rather than 'European'.[25] In her view, the narrative of unique European values overlooks the multitude of identities in Europe and indicates indifference to Europe's exploitative colonial heritage. In addition, Hans Kundnani pointed to the ethnical undertone of the European autonomy discourse and criticized the emerging pro-EU narrative as a primarily white civilization project.[26]

The question arises, whether the strategic autonomy discourse is part of a larger trend in which the EU is tempted to turn into a 'Civilization State'.[27] To counter this claim, it is often pointed out that European identity has not been defined in juxtaposition towards 'others'. Instead, Europe's other is its own war-prone past.[28] This view was brought up again by Mark Leonard in his defence of the pro-European narrative, when pointed out that 'the EU has in its DNA a rejection of the violent ethno-nationalism that led to the death camps'.[29]

A third self-conception of the EU sees the emergence of a *realist power*.[30] The narrative of the EU's development as an international actor is from this perspective neither grounded in the economic project of market integration, nor in the normative heritage as a peace project. Instead, a more pragmatic – or more realistic – interpretation of the international challenges that the EU is facing guides its international role. From this perspective, the EU's identity as an international actor emerged because of the structural changes in the 1990s and with the end of the bipolar

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[22] J. de Weck, *Macron's European Identity Politics*, IP Quarterly (Oct. 2020).
[23] Speech by French President Emmanuel Macron at the Ambassadors' conference (27 Aug. 2019), https://lv.ambafrance.org/Ambassadors-conference-Speech-by-M-Emmanuel-Macron-President-of-the-Republic.
[24] R. Balfour, *Against a European Civilization: Narratives About the European Union*, Carnegie Europe (6 Apr. 2021).
[25] *Ibid*.
[26] H. Kundnani, *What Does It Mean to Be 'Pro-European' Today?*, The New Statesman (Feb. 2021).
[27] A. Glencross, *The EU and the Temptation to Become a Civilizational State*, 26(2) Eur. Foreign Aff. Rev. 331–350 (2021).
[28] Rumelili, *supra* n. 13.
[29] M. Leonard, *The Meaning of Pro-Europeanism – A Response to Hans Kundnani*, The New Statesman (Feb. 2021).
[30] Please note that (Neo-)realism as IR theory give little weight to the identity and social dimension explored in this article. The notion of realism in this case rather refers to the EU's self-conception's similar focus on security interests and structural limitations.

international order. These changes highlighted the need for the EU to develop its own ability in a situation when US involvement in European security is uncertain. This narrow and functional self-conception of the EU as an international actor is independent from the normative characteristics of its humanitarian and market-liberal roots. The EU is seen as a 'power multiplier' for Member States and a tool to 'shape the external milieu' through its security and economic instruments.[31]

With the 2016 EU Global strategy the realist interpretation of EU foreign policy gained more currency. It introduces the notion of 'principled pragmatism' in the vocabulary of EU foreign policy. In the context of instability in the EU's southern neighbourhood and the connected migration crisis in particular, the new principle represented at least a discursive change.[32] The strategy signalled a shift in focus from democracy promotion to promoting 'resilience' and hence stability, with less concern about the type of regime.[33] Sven Biscop referred to this more pragmatic approach as 'Realpolitik with European characteristics', meaning 'a rejection of liberal utopianism, but not of liberal ideals themselves'.[34] As a result of this strategic reorientation, European foreign policy should be guided more by what is possible in the strategic environment than by what would be desirable according to its beliefs. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 once more underlined the realist identity of the EU, which is confronted with a dangerously eroding security environment on its continent. However, a pure realist narrative of the EU's firm reaction to the Russian aggression would fail to paint the whole picture. The war also underlines the normative basis and attractiveness of the EU as a liberal and rules-based project in contrast to Putin's strongman playbook.

The internal debate on the self-image of the EU an international actor is not new. In the past this has often led to an adjustment of how the EU sees international role. For example, as a result of the creation of the military dimension with start of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), many saw a challenge to the traditionally 'civilian' nature of the EU. Consequently, the narrative of a comprehensive power emerged, which combined the 'soft' civilian aspects of EU's power (e.g., crisis management instruments) with a 'hard' edge.[35] Yet, in the current debates on EU foreign policy, the adaptation process seems still open.[36]

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[31]   A. Hyde-Price, 'Normative' Power Europe: A Realist Critique, 13(2) J. Eur. Pub. Pol'y 217–234 (2006).

[32]   N. Bremberg, From 'Partnership' to 'Principled Pragmatism': Tracing the Discursive Practices of the High Representatives in the EU's Relations With the Southern Mediterranean, 29(3) Eur. Sec. 359–375 (2020).

[33]   A. E. Juncos, Resilience as the New EU Foreign Policy Paradigm: A Pragmatist Turn?, 26(1) Eur. Sec. 1–18 (2017).

[34]   S. Biscop, The EU Global Strategy: Realpolitik With European Characteristics, Egmont Institute Security Policy Brief 75 (June 2016).

[35]   Koenig, supra n. 8.

[36]   T. Diez, The EU in a Changing World Order: In Defence of Normative Power 2.0, 29(1) Marmara J. Eur. Stud. 1–20 (2021).

4 EU'S ROLE CONTESTATION

Not only is there a conflict between the different self-conception of the EU, the joint approach to international politics is also contested on several external dimensions. This external contestation of the EU by elites and interest groups has grown in recent years, closely connected to the larger international transformations that brought intense debates on international norms and cooperation.[37] In the following, the article discusses the external role contestation of the EU by looking at its multilateral, bilateral and the transnational context.

Notions that the *multilateral* system is in a state of prolonged crisis are commonplace. Yet the extent to which broader trends in international politics are contributing to a contestation of the EU's international role are only just surfacing. The visions of 'effective multilateralism' in the 2003 European Security Strategy is a good example of the EU's normative role-conception and the idea to shape the international politics in line with its own rules-based integration experience on the continent.[38] Yet, the track-record of this approach has been mixed at best. While the EU embraced the idea of taking the 'national' out of 'international politics', it is questionable to what extent major powers, such as China, Russia, and even the US are committed to the multilateral order and are comfortable in being limited in their sovereign decisions.[39] From this perspective the norms and rules of the international order are being constantly contested and may even be misused by actors to gain unfair advantage from global cooperation in their growing rivalry.

The fate of the Iran nuclear agreement is the most prominent recent example of the contestation of the EU's multilateral approach. The Trump administration's resolute use of economic instruments to push Europeans to follow US foreign-policy objectives has damaged European international role. The ability of the US to 'weaponize interdependence'[40] and to use its dominant position in global finance was visible when the Trump administration withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and reinstated sanctions against Iran as part of a maximum pressure campaign. The EU only just managed to keep the Iran deal alive, and it was helpless in implementing its common position and living up to its commitments in the JCPOA in the face of US extraterritorial sanctions on European businesses. While the Biden administration might reverse course and

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[37] K. Biedenkopf et al., *Introduction: Shades of Contestation and Politicisation of CFSP*, 30(3) Eur. Sec. 325–343 (2021).

[38] J. Solana, *A Secure Europe in a Better World: European Security Strategy*, 11 Council Eur. Union (2003).

[39] E. Sinkkonen & V. Sinkkonen, *A Multi-dimensional View of US-China Great-Power competition,* in *Strategic Autonomy and the Transformation of the EU*, FIIA Report 67 (N. Helwig ed. 2021).

[40] H. Farrell & A.L. Newman, *Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion*, 44(1) Int'l Sec. 42–79 (Summer 2019).

join an updated agreement of the E3+3 with Teheran, the incident revealed the EU's vulnerability and inability to circumvent US sanctions. Thus, the Iran case showed the stark mismatch between the EU's conception of how it works as a multilateral diplomatic actor and the US interest-based approach to global politics.

A similar challenge to the EU's international identity can be witnessed with regards to the EU's ambitions to reform the WTO. The inability of the WTO rule book to address unfair Chinese trade practices, or the paralysis of the rules-based trade dispute settlement do not align with the EU's ambition to externalize its market-based model. In recent years the EU has had to concentrate on temporary solutions without US support to allow for the settlement of rules-based international trade disputes. Now there are hopes that the Biden administration might be more favourable towards WTO reform. However, even a more open-minded US administration will have to approach any reforms with the interests of US industries and protective safeguards in mind.[41] Similarly, although it is in its interests to sign up for WTO reform to keep the system afloat, China does not wish to see its state-centric and subsidy-based economic model compromised.[42] In face of external US and Chinese elite contestation of the EU's supranationally organized trade model, the prospects for comprehensive multilateral reforms remain bleak.

The extent to which the EU's very identity and role as an international actor is being challenged could be witnessed during the 2014 Ukraine crisis. Based on its normative identity that developed from its historical experiences, its foreign policy premise is based on functioning rules-based cooperation across national divides. The annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbass region came as a shock with the realization that other actors do not respect international rules to the same extent. To some extent, this caused a reconceptualization of the EU role vis-à-vis Russia and pushed it to use its coercive power in the form of economic sanctions.[43]

The *bilateral* diplomatic environment in the EU and its Member States has become more challenging in recent years, with direct opposition to EU positions and the questioning of its legitimacy as a diplomatic actor. The Trump administration's downgrade of the EU embassy in Washington DC from a Member State to an international organization in late 2018 was the most telling example. Although the practical repercussions of the demotion scarcely extended beyond protocol issues, the move was highly symbolic and representative of the broader EU struggle to be perceived as a legitimate actor abroad. Previous US administrations, including that of President Obama, occasionally lost patience in interacting

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[41] K. A. Elliott, *Can Biden Salvage the World Trade Organization?*, World Politics Rev. (17 Nov. 2020).
[42] V. Zhu, *China and WTO Reform: Minimal Changes Only, Please*, Institute Montaigne Blog (15 Mar. 2019).
[43] M. Natorski & K. Pomorska, *Trust and Decision-Making in Times of Crisis: The EU's Response to the Events in Ukraine*, 55 J. Com. Mkt. Stud. 54–70 (2017).

with a multitude of EU representatives who tended to put procedure above content.[44] President Trump's open hostility towards the EU and his preference for dealing with individual Member States took the aversion to the next level.

Nevertheless, the EU was able to stand its ground to some extent when it came to its position as a global market power. Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker declared, 'I am the European Union' to clarify the exclusive competences of his institution in a high-profile White House meeting on trade in July 2018.[45] Margarethe Vestager, EU Commissioner for Competition at the time, repeatedly drew President Trump's fire, given her anti-trust focus on US digital companies. This shows that the EU is less contested in its role as a market power because its actions have an impact on others.

To what extent the new administration under Biden will represent a larger shift in US-EU relations and lower US contestation of the EU's international role is still an open question.[46] Given the US' new-found focus on the multilateral agenda (e.g., on Climate change) and on the value competition with China, one can assume that the US administration will be more open to the normative elements of EU's foreign policy as a 'Western' partner in an increasingly authoritarian world. Yet, the growing competition with China also means that the US will especially value the hard power elements of EU's foreign and security policy and welcome its development as a realist power.

In terms of relations with China and Russia, discussions concerning the EU's ability and how it is perceived as a diplomatic actor are often linked to its limited success in promoting its values. It is frequently criticized for not living up to the values enshrined in its treaties, and for falling short in terms of sharply criticizing and responding to Beijing's and Moscow's human-rights and rule-of-law records. The contestation of the EU as a normative power resurfaced recently regarding the weak human-rights commitments in the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI), and the EU's hesitant reaction following Russia's jailing of the opposition leader Alexei Navalny.

In addition to the interstate contestation, whether multilaterally or bilaterally, the EU's conception as an international actor is challenged by *transnational* dynamics that bring new critical public and elite opinions to the fore. The rise of populism in many so-called Western societies is such a wider trend and can serve as an example how the EU's self-image, in particular as a normative power, is increasingly getting under pressure. The rise of a populist brand of governance in some EU Member States have led to a contestation of some of the foundational

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[44] V. Pop, *EU-US Summits to Take Place 'Only When Necessary'*, EUObserver (27 Mar. 2010).
[45] Jean-Claude Juncker in an interview with *Der Spiegel* (1 Nov. 2019).
[46] G. Martin & V. Sinkkonen, in this special issue.

values of EU foreign policy, including on matters of human rights and multilateral cooperation. To the extent that these challenges go beyond the normal political debates on the aims and instruments of the EU, but displays a departure from key norms, one can even detect signs of 'de-Europeanization' of EU foreign and security policy.[47] Another example of a transnational dynamics undermining the EU's international role is the growing technological disruption.[48] New technologies also brought along new threats in the cyber and information space, with the need for the EU to adapt as a realist power. Yet, new technologies brought also challenges to the EU's normative power role, as questions on changing norms and values, for example on data–privacy, moved centre stage.

5   THE EU'S RESPONSE: ADAPTATION AND AMBIGUITY

The institutional actors in Brussels as well as the Member States responded to the contestation of the EU's international role in recent years. There has been considerable talk about an EU 'geopolitical moment'[49] or 'geopolitical awakening'.[50] Europe should develop an 'appetite for power'[51] and become 'a player, not a plaything'.[52] Analyses and political rhetoric were full of metaphors that describe or call for a set of measures required for Member States to become more efficient, unified and forceful in their international actions. In the following, the discussions and adaptations following the adoption of the 2016 EU Global Strategy will be in the focus. The EU Global Strategy for the first time mentioned the goal of strategic autonomy of EU's foreign and security policy and became a key reference point in the debate.[53] The EU response and the impact on its global role will be analysed along three discussions: the geopolitical Commission, the decision-making debate in the CFSP, and the implementation of the defence agenda following the EU Global Strategy.

    One of the most prominent signs of an adjustment of the EU's role was Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's announcement to lead a geopolitical Commission at the start of her term in 2019. While the move was seen as a clear reaction to the international challenges stemming from a more assertive

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[47]   P. Müller et al., *The Domestic Challenge to EU Foreign Policy-Making: From Europeanisation to de-Europeanisation?*, 43(5) J. Eur. Integ. 519–534 (2021).

[48]   A. Ken Jakobsson & M. Stolz, *Principled Big Tech: European Pursuit of Technological Autonomy*, in *Strategic Autonomy and the Transformation of the EU* 105–127 (N. Helwig ed., FIIA Report 2021).

[49]   D. Schwarzer, *Europe's Geopolitical Moment*, Internationale Politik Q. 1 (Jan. 2021).

[50]   M. Bergmann, *Europe's Geopolitical Awakening*, Foreign Affairs (20 Aug. 2021).

[51]   HR/VP Josep Borrell during a panel at the Munich Security Conference (Feb. 2020).

[52]   C. Bildt & M. Leonard, *From Plaything to Player: How Europe Can Stand Up for Itself in the Next Five Years*, European Council on Foreign Relations (17 July 2019).

[53]   N. Helwig & V. Sinkkonen, Strategic Autonomy and the EU as a global actor: The evolution, debate and theory of a contested term, introduction to this special issue.

China and uncertainties in the transatlantic partnership, it also raised questions with regards to possible tensions with the Commission's traditionally more impartial role as a guardian of the treaties.[54] Part of the revamp of the Commission were changes to the internal organization, whereby three executives Vice-Presidents gained more procedural power on big ticket items, such as the European Green Deal and the digital transformation.

Behind the shifts in the organization and politicization of the European Commission was the recognition that the EU's competitiveness depends increasingly on its ability to link its economic and regulatory instruments to its geostrategic goals.[55] In particular regarding the EU self-conception as a market power, this seemed to signal a fundamental shift in how the Union evaluates the role of economic and trade policies. The traditional image of the EU as a market power entails that issues of regulatory, financial and trade policy are disconnected from political and security concerns. In its external relations, the focus of the EU as a market power is on promoting its market-liberal norms and regulations, not using economic instruments (including trade barriers) to promote liberal values and security interests.

However, we can currently observe the EU's increasingly strategic use of economic instruments. In addition to the defence against coercive and distorting economic practices, the current trade policy of the EU Commission is also focusing on the promotion of labour standards in international supply chains, the decarbonization of the global economy, as well as the promotion of data-privacy in the digital transformation.[56] As a consequence the market power image appears less firmly rooted in the EU's fundamental market-liberal principles and includes now elements of the normative power narrative, namely the centrality of certain values to the EU's external action.

In addition to the normative reorientation of economic policies under the geopolitical Commission, also security interests became increasingly important to EU's trade, investment, and industrial policies. Examples include the Commissions activities in minimizing risks connected to Chinese 5G infrastructures and foreign direct investment,[57] as well as the EU's growing assertiveness in using economic sanctions to address matters of international security.[58] A new Directorate-General for Defence Industries and Space (DG DEFIS) for the first time manifests the role of the Commission in defence policies and implements a European Defence Fund

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[54] S. Blockmans & D. Gros, *From a Political to a Politicised Commission?*, CEPS Policy Insight 12 (2019).
[55] N. Helwig, *The New EU Leadership: The von der Leyen Commission Focuses on Europe's Geo-economic Power*, FIIA Briefing Paper 274 (Nov. 2019).
[56] T. Gerhke in this special issue.
[57] T. Poutala et al in this special issue.
[58] *Sharpening EU Sanctions Policy: Challenges and Responses in a Geopolitical Era*, FIIA Report 63 (N. Helwig ed. 2020).

to foster European security and military capabilities. In line with the realist power conception of the EU, the security challenges of recent years have gained more relevance and weakened the impact of the market-liberal roots of EU's internal and external economic policies. The EU's strong economic retaliation against Russia following the invasion of Ukraine exemplifies that economic interests and free-market mechanisms fade into the background, when the EU's normative basis and security interests are at risk.

These shifts in the EU's market power identity are rhetorically packaged under the label of (open) strategic autonomy. For example, the Commission's 2021 trade review states that open strategic autonomy includes 'aligning and using all trade tools in support of EU interests and policy objectives'.[59] In the words European Council President Charles Michel, the promotion of values is also an objective of strategic autonomy. He called for using EU's instruments and resources to 'forge a more peaceful, a more humane and a fairer world'.[60]

The strategic reorientation of the Commission's economic instruments is not the only adaptation of recent years. In the CFSP, the discussion on decision-making reforms took up steam, without however leading to substantial changes in the treaties or in practice yet. The issue of qualified majority voting (QMV) in the CFSP has long been under discussion among a rather small circle of integrationist-minded scholars and policy planners. The current treaties allow for several possibilities (for example constructive abstention, Article 31(1) TEU) to avoid gridlock if consensus among the twenty-seven Member States cannot be achieved.[61] Member States make scant use of these provisions. For example, the Council invoked the enabling clause when amending sanctions listings in a few uncontroversial cases. In 2008, Cyprus used the possibility of abstaining without blocking the decision to set up the EULEX Kosovo mission.

For a long time, without major paralysis, the national-sovereignty argument outweighed the possible efficacy gains of a speedier and less compromising decision-making process. After all, the unanimity principle also ensured the broad ownership of decisions taken among Member States. In recent years, calls for extending the use of QMV in the CFSP grew louder, coming from the Commission President and the EU High Representative, for example, the policy areas under discussion including human rights declarations, civilian operations and sanctions. The change of mind came after a culture of disruption started to engulf the Council's decision-making

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[59]   European Commission, *supra* n. 16.
[60]   C. Michel, *Strategic autonomy for Europe – the aim of our generation*, Speech to the Bruegel think tank (Sept. 2020).
[61]   For the legal background on CFSP decision-making procedures, *see* K. Pomorska & R. Wessel, *Qualified Majority Voting in CFSP: A Solution to the Wrong Problem?*, 26(3) Eur. Foreign Aff. Rev. 351– 358 (2021).

rooms and slowed-down the consensus-making machinery. More and more CFSP decisions were watered down or delayed by a single or very few Member States, sometimes with questionable motives.[62] A high-profile recent case was the month-long slowdown of sanctions against Belarusian officials by Cyprus in late 2020.

The new focus on QMV largely underlines the realist power image of the EU, which is adapting to new international realities with decision-making reforms rather than acting in unison based on a shared set of norms. The debates mirror the need of the EU to adjust to a more challenging environment in which foreign actors, such as China or Russia, might actively try to influence single Member States to prevent a consensus decision. Hence, it is in line with – and represented in – the strategic autonomy discourse as a way for the EU to ensure independence and swift decision-making in the growing geopolitical rivalry.[63] The efficiency argument is also present in the discussion on differentiated forms of EU decision-making, such as the possible creation of a European Security Council comprised only of a limited number of permanent or rotating members.[64]

In addition, there is a case to be made on the impact on the EU's normative power conception. As Juncos and Pomorska observe, the decision of, for example, Hungary to block UN Human Rights Council statements go beyond mere political disagreement and can be traced back to substantive differences on norms.[65] These include different understanding on interference in domestic affairs and on human rights (e.g., LGBT+ rights). The challenge of fundamental EU values by some Member States undermines the EU's position as a normative power internationally. Whether institutional adjustments will be adequate in addressing this problem is subject to debate.[66]

Finally, EU Member States intensified their cooperation on security and defence issues in recent years. Arguably, this is the most active area of cooperation when it comes to the EU's global role. Initiatives, such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation in defence (PESCO) in connection with the above-mentioned European Defence Fund, aim at a better integration of EU defence industries and forces. It is noteworthy that due to the EU's competences and

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[62] For an overview *see* N. Koenig, *Qualified Majority Voting in EU Foreign Policy: Mapping Preferences*, Jacques Delors Centre Policy Brief (2020).

[63] *See* e.g., S. Anghel et al., *On the Path to 'Strategic Autonomy' the EU in an Evolving Geopolitical Environment,* European Parliamentary Research Service (Sept. 2020); U. Franke & T. Varma, *Independence Play: Europe's Pursuit of Strategic Autonomy*, ECFR Flash Scorecard (July 2019).

[64] R. Alcaro & M. Siddi, *Lead Groups in EU Foreign Policy: The Cases of Iran and Ukraine*, 8(2) Eur. Rev. Int'l Stud. 143–165 (2021); P. Rieker, *Differentiated Integration and Europe's Global Role: A Conceptual Framework*, 26(3) Eur. Foreign Aff. Rev. 1–14 (2021).

[65] A. Juncos & K. Pomorska, *Contesting Procedural Norms: The Impact of Politicisation on European Foreign Policy Cooperation*, 30(3) Eur. Sec. 367–384 (2021).

[66] Pomorska & Wessel, *supra* n. 61.

experiences in industrial and research funding matters, a strong focus has been on the defragmentation of the defence market and the development of capabilities. However, an interpretation of EU's defence integration activities as an example of its market power image, would be to narrow. As Blockmans and Macchiarini Crosson argue, additional factors are at play, such as Member States' 'level of ambition in international security policy, willingness to use military force and scope of action for the executive branch in military-security'.[67] The EU's focus on hard security matters in the aftermath of the bodged withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Russian invasion of Ukraine underlines the EU's refashioning as a realist power.[68]

The EU's realist reorientation is also reflected in the current strategic compass process. The process aims at developing an actionable strategic paper that details the EU's ambition and next steps in the security and defence sphere. By late 2021, a first draft surfaced which highlights concrete steps to increase the EU's military capacity and the possibility for rapid deployment of forces.[69] Partly, as a reaction to the mishandled Afghanistan withdrawal, Member States seemed to initiate another attempt to reform the EU's battlegroup concept, this time with the use of Article 44 TEU that allows able and willing groups of Member States to launch joint operations.

Having its roots in the debates in the field of security and defence, the strategic autonomy concept is very present in the discourse on the current EU defence integration. However, defence policy is also an area where the term strategic autonomy is most contested.[70] This is due to the connotation that strategic auton-omy might imply a distancing from the US, with possible unintended consequences for the future US commitment to European security. Hence, many Atlantic oriented Member States rather prefer the term 'capability to act' or 'strategic responsibility'.[71]

Overall, EU's response has seen surprising levels of adaptation in ins interna-tional role conception. The geopolitical challenges of the 2010s and Russia's invasion of Ukraine (at the time of writing) have underlined its role as a realist power, capable of responding to current challenges and of protecting the security of EU citizens through its various military and economic instruments. At the same time, the competition with China and tensions with the US have led the EU to emphasize its normative basis as well and to adjust some of its economic and

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[67]   S. Blockmans & D. Macchiarini Crosson, *PESCO: A Force for Positive Integration in EU Defence*, 26(Special Issue) Eur. Foreign Aff. Rev. 87–110, 108 (2021).

[68]   K. Mustasilta in this special issue.

[69]   A. Brzozowski, *LEAK: What the EU's Future Military Strategy Could Look Like*, Euractiv.com (10 Nov. 2021).

[70]   N. Koenig, *The EU as an Autonomous Defence Actor*, in *Strategic Autonomy and the Transformation of the EU*, FIIA Report 67, 69–86 (N. Helwig ed. 2021).

[71]   Helwig, *supra* n. 4.

diplomatic policies accordingly. International trends of decoupling have brought the liberal-market philosophy of the EU out of the focus. However, its core elements are still preserved in the 'open strategic autonomy concept'.

It is noteworthy, that the strategic autonomy concept serves as a reference point in all the above debates. Whether it is about the EU's efforts to support the global free trade agenda, the necessity to promote EU's norms and values, or ambition to become a more effective security actor. As a consequence, the strategic autonomy concept is rather a sign of the continuous role ambiguity that the EU is facing in a more complex international environment.

6   STRATEGIC AUTONOMY: CONSTRUCTIVE OR DESTRUCTIVE?

At first sight, the strategic autonomy debate is about very tangible, material aspects of European security. Does Europe have the military capability to defend itself in case of American disengagement? Can the EU single market uphold its competitiveness and independence in an age of increasing global economic competition? This article started from a different assumption, however. Strategic autonomy is also about the stories that the EU tells about itself and how it wants to be perceived by others. Yet, the EU does not have a single narrative that describes the origin of its international identity or what it aims to achieve. Instead, there are several self-conceptions based on its experience as an economic, peace and security project.

This article attempted to show that the attractiveness of the strategic autonomy concept is based on the fact that it resonates with different ideas on the EU's international role. It can be evoked to underline the distinct value base that distinguishes EU's foreign policy from that of others. Or it can be used to create the image of an EU security actor that has to become more pragmatic when dealing with the harsher international environment. And finally, EU's market-liberal identity can be reflected in the term, as the European single market needs to be defended against external coercion or interference.

Here is where the relevance of the strategic autonomy concept for the debate on EU's international role lies. The term appears to be neutral with regard to whether the EU aims to become more normative, realistic, or market-oriented in its external relations. The argument made in this article is that this is the reason, why it is used with such a frequency in today's debate. Yet, instead of allowing for a clearer strategic choice between the different paths that the market-liberal, normative, or realist role concepts offer, the strategic autonomy concept increases the ambiguity of EU's role conception.

The question whether this is a positive or negative sign for the EU's international role is one that this article left open for future research. Two models are possible. A negative reading of the strategic autonomy debate might

underline the destructive ambiguity of the term. By evoking their support for the ambiguous idea of strategic autonomy Member States avoid taking up clear positions on important aspects of international relations, whether it is their support for the transatlantic alliance or for trade liberalization. The term might stand in the way of a clear formulation of a European strategy. Moreover, as especially transatlantic-oriented Member States pointed out,[72] it might send mixed signals to international partners about the future orientation of EU's foreign and security policy.

However, the term could also induce constructive ambiguity into the debate of EU foreign policy. As noted above, the debates between the normative and realist orientation of the EU have been going on for decades and seem to be neither solvable nor necessarily productive. Concepts, such as strategic autonomy, might help to push meta debates of EU's international role to the backburner. Instead, a focus on strategic autonomy allows Member States and EU institutions to concentrate on the concrete agenda that they want to advance.

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[72]   J. Gotkowska, *Poland and the Baltic States: A Preference for a Renewed West*, Heinrich Böll Stuftung (8 Jan. 2021).