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European middle powers

Germany, France and Italy
as international actors

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Summary

Behind the geopolitics of great power competition lies a broad and diverse group of international actors that cannot match the status of major powers, yet wield considerable influence in specific policies and regions. These states are often referred to as middle powers, and they include actors from both the West and the Global South. They tend to act in multilateral formats, join alliances with like-minded partners and diversify their foreign policy partnerships.

This Research Paper examines the concept of middlepowerness and applies it to an investigation of the foreign policies of the largest EU member

states: Germany, France and Italy. Despite their relative decline compared with major and rising powers, these states retain significant resources that enable them to exert autonomous influence on specific issues in global politics. This capacity is particularly significant at a time of crisis in the transatlantic alliance due to the progressive US disengagement from Europe and from liberal values. The EU can act as a “power amplifier” for member states, but pooling the resources of middle powers does not automatically turn either those states or the EU into major powers in foreign policy.

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Introduction

It has become commonplace among EU policymakers to say that individual member states cannot shape global politics on their own; only as a united bloc of 27 countries can they join the club of major powers. The question of whether the EU can really attain this status is disputed, especially as current global politics increasingly revolves around US–China competition. There is less disagreement over the argument that the international standing of individual European states is diminishing and even the largest ones are no longer great powers. While this argument is hardly ever challenged, some of its broader implications are not explored in sufficient depth.

Germany and France have long been decisive in shaping European integration. In the recent past, it was thanks to the initiative of “lead groups” of larger member states that the EU occasionally played a significant – though short-lived and at times controversial – foreign policy role. For instance, Germany and France together with the UK created the framework within which negotiations on the Iranian nuclear programme took place, leading to the conclusion of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015. Between 2015 and 2021, Berlin and Paris also mediated negotiations between Russia and Ukraine in the Normandy format concerning the Donbas conflict in eastern Ukraine.¹ It may be tempting to see their loss of global influence as an opportunity to build a more balanced EU foreign policy, where smaller powers have greater say and influence.

Indeed, smaller EU members can play a significant role in specific issues. The Nordic states, for example, have long been active in peacekeeping,

international mediation, and the promotion of humanitarian norms. However, the leadership and resources of larger members remain essential for the most complex aspects of EU foreign policy, such as relations with major powers. At a time of growing geopolitical and geoeconomic competition, it seems counterintuitive to expect a revival of European foreign policy to come from smaller EU members, with even more limited material resources, soft power and global diplomatic outreach.

Likewise, the idea that we live in a post-Westphalian world, where states relinquish sovereignty to supranational bodies, has clashed with the realities of recent years. US President Donald Trump’s economic nationalism and aggressive foreign policy, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the rise of China and regional powers, and the weakening of multilateral frameworks demonstrate that the (nation-)state is alive and kicking. Indeed, the very existence of the main (semi-)supranational institution of EU foreign policymaking, namely the European External Action Service (EEAS), has been questioned by France, Germany and other members due to its poor performance.²

This goes back to the question of larger EU members: what can they achieve today as global actors, and what implications does this have for the EU? The full answer to this question is complex. This Research Paper addresses the issue by reconceptualising the largest EU member states, namely Germany, France and Italy, as foreign policy actors based on their current strengths, capabilities and weaknesses. It argues that ‘middlepowerness’ can be an apt concept to describe them, simultaneously acknowledging their loss of global standing and their

1 Alcaro and Siddi 2021.

2 Foy 2026.

continued influence in regional contexts and in the EU. While the concept of a middle power has long been a topic in International Relations (IR) scholarship and diplomatic debates, it has recently returned to the foreground in mainstream politics too. Most notably, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney has forcefully argued that middle powers should join forces to counter great power rivalry and build a more cooperative world.³

The Research Paper begins by examining definitions of a middle power, which inevitably entails engaging with the complex question of power in IR. The concept is then discussed with reference to Germany, France and Italy.⁴ The paper shows how these countries qualify as middle powers, despite displaying different shades of power, identities and ambitions. It also explores the implications of the concept for their foreign policy actorness and cautions against overextending its application. While the focus of the paper is on state actorness, the conclusion also briefly addresses implications for EU foreign policy.

1. Conceptualising middlepowerness

It is difficult to define a middle power because power is “relative, perspectival, dynamic and contextual”.⁵ It includes material aspects, such as military and economic strength, and immaterial ones, such as soft or cultural power – the capability to attract others through societal models, art, media and social norms. Measuring power is not easy, especially its immaterial aspects. This leads to one of the main contentions in debates about middlepowerness: where to place a middle power on an imaginary scale of power? This question may appear redundant at first, as each state is different and adding a “power tag” to it could be seen as having little relevance.

However, state leaders and sometimes even citizens attach great importance to the question of status in international relations. For some countries that clearly cannot aspire to the status of a great power due to material or other constraints, attaining

middle-power status can be an important goal. Middlepowerness can also serve as a self-identifier for former great powers that are no longer able to play a leading role independently in global politics.

It is therefore unsurprising that a group of scholars has long tried to define, rank and study middle powers. The first body of relevant scholarship emerged during the Cold War, driven by a “niche” interest in analysing IR beyond the omnipresent issue of bipolar superpower competition. It adopted a realist approach and criteria in tune with mainstream IR scholarship at the time, focusing first and foremost on material capabilities.

In the 1970s, Cantori and Spiegel identified a hierarchy of seven types of power: in descending order, primary, secondary, middle and minor powers, regional states, micro-states, and colonies.⁶ In the 1980s, Holbraad’s work centred on differentiating middle powers from great and minor powers based on gross national product and population size in six different regions or continents.⁷ This “early” scholarship noted that middle powers preferred to act through multilateral frameworks or like-minded coalitions rather than unilaterally.

The idea that middle powers tend to engage in peacekeeping operations or display an altruistic foreign policy and norm-driven behaviour is also present in post-Cold War literature. However, more recent works have also criticised the term and its uses. For example, constructivist scholarship has argued that the term is too ambiguous because it is attached to a very broad range of countries and is often used arbitrarily by state leaders to advance national interests.⁸ Chapnik contended that it was an inconsequential title used by some leaders exclusively for reasons of status, to maintain the illusion of international influence.⁹ Conversely, other scholars viewed the quest for middlepowerness as significant because it shapes a country’s self-conception and helps explain its foreign policy. Hence, drawing on role theory, Karim defined middlepowerness as a question of status that countries pursue through

3 Carney 2026.

4 The UK would be another apt case study of a European middle power (cf. Hill 2016). However, due to the focus of the paper on EU members, the particularities of post-Brexit UK foreign policy, and length constraints, the UK remains outside the scope of this paper.

5 Robertson 2017.

6 Cantori and Spiegel 1970.

7 Holbraad 1984.

8 Cooper 2011, 329.

9 Chapnik 1999, 79.

the enactment of role conceptions – in particular, through the conduct of foreign policy.¹⁰

Following the demise of the Cold War order, the crisis of US unipolarity and the rise of regional powers, interest in middle powers has increased further. While most states associated with middlepowerness were Western countries during the Cold War, the term is now applied to many non-Western states that have experienced significant economic growth or have strengthened their influence in a certain region, such as Brazil, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, India, Indonesia and Iran.¹¹ Jordaan distinguished between traditional middle powers – mostly wealthy, stable, and egalitarian countries located in the West but with limited regional influence – and emerging middle powers, which tend to be materially inegalitarian, recently democratised states with regional influence and a reformist global agenda.¹²

Middle powers frequently adopt a multi-vectoral foreign policy and pursue partnerships across geopolitical dividing lines. This is true of non-Western middle powers. However, to some extent, it has also defined the foreign policy of European middle powers like Germany, France and Italy, which sought to balance their alliance with the US by pursuing economic partnerships with non-Western great powers, namely China and Russia.¹³ While Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine and the European security crisis in 2022 led them to close ranks with Washington, the unfriendly stance of the second Trump administration and the broader reorientation of US foreign policy are now encouraging a difficult, partial pursuit of strategic autonomy. Arguably, the material resources and long-standing diplomatic know-how of European middle powers are essential to the EU's quest for a more autonomous and influential role in international relations.

At a conceptual level, a central question is how middle powers respond to the growing contestation of US hegemony. Giacomello and Verbeek contend that the erosion of US supremacy generally invites states to reconsider their positions and seek specific

forms of middle-power status as aspiring global powers, regional powers and niche powers (that is, powers that attempt to lead in specific niche sectors, such as peacekeeping or financial services).¹⁴ However, middle power behaviour may differ depending on alliances or geopolitical positioning. For the (non-Western) majority, contestation of US hegemony is an additional powerful stimulus to diversify partnerships. Due to Trump's hostile attitude and the "pivot" of US foreign policy away from Europe, European middle powers are also exploring options for new partnerships. At the same time, they appear more inclined to tolerate Trump's economic coercion due to their reliance on Washington's security guarantees, which they still broadly perceive as indispensable.

Despite the distinctions and additional qualifications added by scholarship in recent years, military, economic and soft power have largely retained their centrality in defining power and middlepowerness in IR. Economic and industrial capacity along with military strength are essential parameters; they can be backed up or enabled by favourable geography (natural endowments, strategic physical position) and solid demographics. They are complemented by a third category that can be classified as 'cultural and soft power', a range of immaterial factors that drive the appeal, reputation and diplomatic leverage of a state in the international arena. These include cultural and governance models and consolidated foreign policy practices that are widely acknowledged and valued internationally.¹⁵

In this paper, middle powers are defined as actors that are significantly above average in at least one of these three macro-areas but cannot play a leading role in all of them at the same time, nor attain dominance in any one of them. Lacking the resources required for global power projection, they exert their influence regionally or within targeted domains instead. They increase their capacity to act and achieve their goals by utilising alliances and multilateral frameworks strategically. Even as

¹⁰ Karim 2018.

¹¹ Kassab and Ghosn 2026; Giacomello and Verbeek 2020; Ardhani et al. 2023.

¹² Jordaan 2003.

¹³ Cadier 2018; Siddi 2019.

¹⁴ Giacomello and Verbeek 2024.

¹⁵ Nordic international solidarism – combined with an egalitarian domestic model, neutrality and an autonomous foreign policy – could be seen as an instance of how soft and cultural power elevated Sweden to the status of a middle power during the Cold War, despite its relatively small size and limited economic and military strength. Cf. Elgström and Sundström 2025.

members of alliances, they retain some room for autonomous policymaking and can pursue national objectives without excessive subordination to, or bandwagoning with, allied great powers.¹⁶

Identifying a country as a middle power can help to understand its identity, foreign policy ambitions, capabilities and concrete plans. It enables reflection on what the country can achieve for itself and – in the case of EU members – for the EU. Beyond influence and leverage in specific areas of power, it can point to autonomous foreign policy resources and traditions. At the same time, it helps to recognise a country's limitations and the risks involved in venturing into realms and initiatives that require the resources of a great power. This is particularly relevant to European countries that held great power status in the past, when they had empires and greater relative economic and military weight. While they may retain some vestiges of this influence, they have clear economic and military limitations on their ability to sustain power projection independently and cannot match the extensive overseas investments of great powers such as China and the US.

Finally, it is important to recognise that neither niche specialisation nor moderate influence in a policy field is sufficient to qualify a country as a middle power in the global arena. Very few European countries have significant soft power and the economic means to sustain it individually beyond Europe. Only Germany, France and Italy are among the top ten economies by GDP (albeit far behind the US and China, which occupy the top two positions) and members of the G20. In the EU, only France has a limited capability to project significant military power on its own beyond its immediate neighbourhood. Some European states may have been regarded as middle powers in the past thanks to their distinct foreign policy posture or greater relative economic and military weight, but assessments need to be adapted to reflect current realities, including Europe's declining economic and strategic importance.

As previously argued, middlepowerness rests on flexible and partly subjective parameters; some academic definitions may stretch the application of the term, for instance based on a country's claims to moral superiority or its power relative to other small

European countries. These considerations may be useful for understanding a country's domestic and foreign policy identity. However, if middlepowerness is to retain analytical usefulness, the application of the concept should remain circumscribed and be assessed against global standards and levels of recognition extending well beyond national politics and scholarship.

In the current context of great power competition, rising non-Western regional powers and the EU's relative loss of influence, there is less room for European middlepowerness. This is due inter alia to the EU's and its member states' overall economic stagnation, military dependence, weak demographics, lack of leadership and dwindling soft power. However, the EU's largest member states arguably qualify as middle powers, even if on different terms and in distinct ways. The paper now turns to assessing these issues with reference to Germany, France and Italy.

2. Germany: Still a civilian middle power?

Recent scholarship has defined Germany as a middle power thanks to its regional influence in Europe, its leading role in the EU and its norm-based foreign policy in other regional contexts.¹⁷ So far, however, German influence has largely rested on its economic power. Germany boasts the world's third-largest GDP in nominal terms, having recently surpassed Japan.¹⁸ The strength of its economy and, until the 1990s, that of its national currency have enabled Berlin to play a key role in setting the terms of EU economic integration and monetary union.

By contrast, Germany's military power is modest. This is a legacy of the country's history: as German military power is broadly seen as the prime cause of the two world wars, post-1945 Germany was rebuilt around a peaceful, defensive security culture. Public opinion and many political leaders continue to be wary of, if not overtly opposed to, military engagements abroad. Hence, Germany has been described as a civilian power, namely one that uses economic, diplomatic and other non-military

¹⁶ Siddi 2025, 442.

¹⁷ Coticchia and Moro 2020; Wunderlich and Luo 2024.

¹⁸ Worldometers 2026. However, Germany's GDP is only around a fourth of China's GDP and a sixth of that of the United States, and the gap between Germany and the two superpowers is growing.

means to pursue its foreign policy goals, while also relying on multilateral cooperation and international law.¹⁹

This posture was consolidated from the 1990s to the 2010s, when liberal tenets – free trade, norm-based cooperation in multilateral institutions – seemed to prevail in the international system. Germany was widely regarded as the most influential country in the EU, forming an increasingly asymmetric leadership tandem with France, the main constraint on its dominance being its own reluctance to adopt a hegemonic position.²⁰ Drawing on Giacomello and Verbeek's classification, Germany appeared as a middle power with the capability – if not the willingness – to aspire to the status of a great power.

The 2020s have exposed the fragility of Germany's posture. Growing international tensions and recourse to economic statecraft, such as tariffs, sanctions, and the strategic use of foreign aid, highlighted the drawbacks of Germany's reliance on free trade and multilateral frameworks. Its dependence on Russian energy, trade with China and, more recently, its multiple dependencies on the US revealed its weaknesses vis-à-vis major powers.²¹ Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 underscored the importance of military power even on the European continent. For Germany, it was an unprecedented challenge – a turning point, or *Zeitenwende*, in the words of former Chancellor Olaf Scholz – that undermined its long-cherished cooperative *Ostpolitik* with Moscow and triggered a foreign policy identity crisis.²²

Germany has responded to these challenges by rapidly adapting its posture. Military expenditure surged from around USD 56 billion in 2021 to over USD 113 billion in 2025, making Germany the world's fourth-largest military spender, and is set to increase further.²³ It remains to be seen how the surge in military spending will change the nature of German power, and whether it can be reconciled with the antimilitaristic inclinations that still prevail in German public opinion. While higher military spending tends

to be seen as necessary to boost German defence capabilities in the deteriorating security environment, continued reliance on US weapons and technology would do little to enhance Germany's and Europe's strategic autonomy. Furthermore, Germany's projected military dominance in the EU, if left unchecked, risks reawakening past fears among its immediate neighbours. The rising popularity of the nationalist, far-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the possibility that it could one day influence German politics and foreign policy make these concerns more acute.²⁴

While less controversial, other aspects of German power are less impressive. Despite its large nominal GDP, in 2025 Germany registered the slowest growth of all major economies (0.24%). The structural issues that afflict its economy include decades of insufficient investment in infrastructure and education, high energy prices, and the crisis of long-term flagship sectors such as the automotive and chemical industries. These issues raise serious doubts about the prospects for the German (and European) economy.²⁵ In 2025, Germany relaxed its constitutional constraints on public debt to allow additional spending on defence, infrastructure and decarbonisation. However, it will take years to see the results, which will also depend on effective policy implementation by public authorities.²⁶

Germany's international soft power remains limited. While Berlin has an extensive network of institutions promoting German culture and economic interests – from the Goethe-Institut to various political and economic foundations with offices around the world – the German language has limited reach, and domestic political and cultural debates remain inward-looking. After 2023, Germany's image as a supporter of international law and human rights was tarnished by its continued diplomatic backing of Israel, even as Israeli forces committed large-scale human rights violations in Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon and beyond.²⁷ Germany's failure to secure a rotating seat on the UN Security Council (UNSC) in June 2026 was indicative of the extent to which Berlin's stance on these issues

19 Harnisch and Maull 2001.

20 Bulmer and Patterson 2013; Helwig and Siddi 2020.

21 Siddi et al. 2025.

22 Bunde 2025; Siddi 2018.

23 SIPRI 2026.

24 Fix 2026; Maull 2026.

25 Siddi 2026.

26 Storbeck and Kirchfeld 2026.

27 See, for instance, Kühn von Burgsdorff 2026.

had dented its international prestige, especially in the Global South.²⁸ This was the first time in decades that Germany had lost a bid to secure one of the seats reserved for Western Europeans.

Overall, Germany is reassessing the foundations of its power in a difficult international context and while facing domestic political and economic problems. Its military strength is on the rise but lags far behind that of major powers and does not include nuclear capabilities. Its economic and soft power have recently faced considerable challenges. The country's post-Merkel political leadership appears weak and reactive, while the popularity of mainstream parties has sunk to an unprecedented low and the far-right AfD has become the most popular political force nationwide.²⁹

Berlin has struggled to adapt to the great power politics of the 2020s, which in turn has revealed both its objective constraints and persistent reluctance to act on a par with great powers. Although it no longer appears as dominant in the EU as it did in the 2010s, Germany continues to be highly influential in European politics, thanks to its material and institutional resources. Berlin can enhance its global standing especially by building coalitions with European allies, within which it has the potential to be a (co-)leader. In such a leadership role, France still appears as Germany's natural partner.

3. France: A middle power with global ambition

Recent scholarship has defined France as a middle power,³⁰ but this definition may still clash with French official narratives and foreign policy identity. France indeed had a vast colonial empire and was broadly perceived as one of the world's cultural centres; until the 1940s, few analysts would have disputed its great power status. Yet by the 1960s, the country had lost nearly all its colonial possessions, a process in which it suffered serious military and diplomatic defeats – epitomised by the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the Suez Crisis in 1956, and the Algerian War of 1954–1962. French attempts to preserve the empire by using coercion left a negative

legacy that continues to have an impact today. In the bipolar context of the Cold War, Paris was no longer a major power centre. Nonetheless, ever since the establishment of the Fifth Republic by Charles de Gaulle in 1958, *grandeur* (greatpowerness) has been a structural element of French foreign policy.³¹

There are indeed two aspects of French power that are typical of a great power: a permanent seat on the UNSC and an independent and technologically sovereign nuclear deterrent. Both enhance the country's international standing and, after Brexit, put Paris in a unique position in the EU as the only member state combining these attributes. However, their concrete impact on global politics is far more limited than might appear at first sight. The influence of France's permanent seat on the UNSC and the veto power it carries was constrained by superpower dominance during the Cold War and by the complexities of globalisation after 1989. As Christopher Hill has noted, the veto has “ever less practical meaning” for France and the UK, as they are “able to shape events only in conjunction with the more powerful”.³²

Nor should the significance of the French deterrent be overstated. France is nowhere near nuclear parity with the US and Russia, and the gap with China's growing deterrent is also widening. The French nuclear arsenal has recently acquired greater significance in Europe due to the unreliability of the Trump administration amid confrontation with Russia. In March 2026, French President Emmanuel Macron proposed a form of “forward deterrence”, including the temporary deployment of nuclear-capable Rafale aircraft to European allies but excluding nuclear sharing or shared decision-making. Hence, until the French nuclear doctrine and arsenal are upgraded, NATO's nuclear deterrence will rely on the US.³³ Moreover, nuclear weapons are not the sole, and arguably not the main, determinant of military power in today's world. France has limited capability to project power outside Europe and relies on the US for key satellite intelligence. Paris cannot afford a full portfolio of military capabilities for financial reasons.

28 Magee 2026.

29 Thureau 2026.

30 See, for example, Lequesne 2022 and Staunton 2022.

31 Lequesne 2022. De Gaulle's legacy is praised across the French political spectrum, including the far right; see Kauffmann 2026.

32 Hill 2016, 404.

33 Lavikainen 2026.

In the context of post-2022 rearmament, France remains a considerable power by European standards, with a defence budget of USD 68 billion in 2025 (the world's eighth largest); however, its budget is now much smaller than Germany's (USD 113 billion) and considerably smaller than that of the United Kingdom (USD 89 billion).³⁴ Additional spending is complicated by French public finances: in 2025 the debt-to-GDP ratio exceeded 115%, whereas its annual public deficit was 5% of GDP.³⁵ France still has the seventh-largest GDP, but its growth has stagnated in recent years. Overall, while French aspirations to *grandeur* remain intact, material aspects do not corroborate claims of greatpowerness. For this reason, France has been described as a middle power with global ambition.³⁶

Reflecting this ambition, Paris retains the third-largest network of embassies and consulates in the world, after the US and China. France continues to consider multilateral diplomacy essential to its national interest; it is also the sixth-largest contributor to the UN peacekeeping budget. Furthermore, cultural diplomacy is prioritised: the French state directly manages over 200 cultural institutes and schools and actively promotes the French language.³⁷ Despite having lost its status as the main language of diplomacy to English, French remains the world's fourth most widely spoken language, which enhances France's soft power and cultural outreach in ways that are unattainable to most other middle powers. The French state has tried to reach an even wider public by funding an international television network, France 24, that also broadcasts in English, Arabic and Spanish.

However, even this formidable soft power machine cannot reverse broad perceptions of France's long-term decline as a global power. The negative legacy of colonialism continues to weigh on the country. This was most clearly visible in a number of countries in West and Central Africa (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Central African Republic, Chad, Senegal and Ivory Coast), where France withdrew its troops

after decades of military presence. French troops now remain only in Djibouti and Gabon. Overall, the withdrawals highlighted the reorientation of France's former sphere of influence in Africa towards non-Western actors such as Russia, China and the Gulf States.

French claims to a global role also relate to thirteen territories of Overseas France in the Indian Ocean, the Pacific and the Caribbean. A legacy of the colonial empire, they remain part of the French state with different statuses and host military bases.³⁸ However, for some of them the relationship with the metropolitan state is marred by postcolonial dependence and recent resentment. Their geopolitical significance for French power is questionable: small possessions and troop deployments in the Indian and Pacific Oceans do not automatically make France a great power in these regions.³⁹ This was highlighted by the AUKUS crisis in September 2021, when Australia abruptly cancelled a EUR 31 billion defence contract signed five years earlier to acquire submarines from France and announced a new deal with the US and the United Kingdom instead. Paris was informed only hours before the public announcement, which led to a serious diplomatic crisis with Canberra, London and Washington. The crisis emphasised both the limits of France's global ambitions and the lack of reliability of its main non-EU defence partners.

Today, the EU represents the most significant amplifier of French power, particularly in the economic arena, and in turn depends on French leadership. The Franco-German partnership has long been regarded as the motor of European integration. Despite recent differences and the collapse of a strategic project to jointly build a sixth-generation fighter jet, it remains vital for the future of the EU.⁴⁰ While analysts often note that France has used its EU membership instrumentally to maximise national power, there has been a recent convergence of views between Paris and numerous other members on fundamental issues. After Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, French leaders began to see Eastern Europe as central to national security and deployed military

34 SIPRI 2026.

35 INSEE 2026; Abboud 2025. French public debt surged from EUR 2.3 trillion in 2019 to EUR 3.4 trillion in 2025; in absolute terms, it is now the largest national public debt in the EU, after overtaking Italy's in 2020.

36 Lequesne 2022, Staunton 2022.

37 Lequesne 2022.

38 Military bases are located in French Guiana, Réunion and Mayotte, New Caledonia, the French West Indies and French Polynesia.

39 David 2025.

40 Chassany 2026; Schramm and Krotz 2024.

assets and troops in the Baltic states and Romania. The simultaneous French withdrawal from the traditional area of interest in West Africa contributed to this shift.⁴¹

Most importantly, Trump's return to the White House in 2025 and the crisis of the transatlantic relationship have boosted EU members' interest in the French concept of strategic autonomy. The idea goes back to de Gaulle's conception of Europe as an alternative power centre to the US; in its current form, it refers to European sovereignty vis-à-vis both the US and China, especially in the economic, military and technological fields. Macron put forward his concept of European strategic autonomy in 2019 but received little concrete support, especially as Joe Biden's presidency in the US improved transatlantic relations. With Trump's return to power and his often-hostile attitude to Europe, Macron's reading of the deteriorating transatlantic relationship was vindicated and gained wider acceptance among European leaders.⁴²

Hence, France now appears as the leader in the EU's strategic thinking, as well as a key member state, thanks to its comparatively large military, economic and diplomatic resources. These strengths are not enough to restore France to its former *grandeur*, however, as its relative global influence continues to decline in most respects. Its positive role in and relationship with the EU could also be called into question if the domestic rise of the Eurosceptic far right continues and eventually affects official policy. Indeed, fragmented national politics and domestic unpopularity have weakened Macron's presidency, particularly since 2024.⁴³ Currently, however, national resources amplified by the EU's economic capabilities and partnerships are sufficient to make France a leading European middle power with global diplomatic outreach.

4. Italy's middlepowerness under pressure

Both scholarly literature and national self-conceptions have long portrayed Italy as a middle power.⁴⁴ Defeat in the Second World War, the ensuing loss of

colonies and material power constraints ruled out any greater ambitions as early as the 1940s. Italy rebuilt its international standing through integration into the transatlantic alliance and the European Economic Community and through a focus on multilateralism. This focus is exemplified by Italy's important role in the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), where it has been present since 1979 and provides one of the largest contingents.

Italy's participation in UNIFIL also reflects its special attention to the Mediterranean region, which remains the core area of its foreign policy. Moreover, in the 1960s Italy began deepening its relations with the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc, a policy that outlasted the USSR and resulted in a strong energy partnership with Russia until 2022.⁴⁵ Alongside its Western integration, the multilateral, Mediterranean and Eastern vectors of Italy's foreign policy have been important components of its middlepowerness. They highlighted how the country, while remaining firmly bound to its Western alliances, retained a degree of autonomy in its foreign policy.

Based on economic and military power, Italy ranks below larger European states (Germany, France and the UK) but significantly higher than others that have sometimes been associated with middle power status (Spain, the Netherlands, Poland and Sweden). Italy boasts the world's ninth-largest GDP and the second-largest industrial output in the EU; its status as a major economy is a key factor underpinning its membership in the G7 and G20. Its military budget looks less impressive, as the country spends a lower percentage of GDP on it than most other European countries. Nonetheless, Italy has the third-largest military budget in the EU after France and Germany.⁴⁶ It has one of the most capable and diversified air forces in Europe and one of the largest Mediterranean navies, including two aircraft/helicopter carriers.

While this overview of aggregate data and foreign policy specialisations would leave no doubt about Italy's middlepowerness, recent trends and structural problems raise questions about its present and prospective status.

Italy's economy has stagnated and experienced three major recessions since the 2000s. Weak

41 Kunz 2025; Karjalainen and Siddi 2025.

42 Lequesne 2022.

43 De Royer 2024.

44 See, for instance, Santoro 1991, Coticchia 2020 and Siddi 2019.

45 Siddi 2019.

46 SIPRI 2026; Worldometers 2026.

competitiveness and structural issues such as heavy bureaucracy and high tax evasion have constrained economic growth. Moreover, Italy's accumulated public debt – the second largest in the EU as a share of GDP (after Greece) and in absolute terms (after France) – weighs heavily on the economy, especially during international economic crises due to high interest payments and limited room to finance public investment. The generous allocation of funds from the EU's post-Covid Recovery and Resilience Facility (EUR 194.4 billion for the period 2021–2026, by far the largest national allocation) provided much-needed investment, but many structural issues remain unresolved. As in the case of Germany, excessive dependence on fossil fuel imports places a further serious constraint on the economy in the aftermath of the 2022 and 2026 energy shocks.

Alongside economic and structural problems, domestic political instability is usually considered a factor diminishing Italy's standing in the EU and internationally. Yet it is populist leadership in particular that weakens the country's international image. Paradigmatic of this issue were former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's terms in office and his deep influence on national politics from the 1990s to the 2010s. His personal scandals and legal problems ultimately undermined the credibility of the Italian government at the height of the Eurozone crisis.⁴⁷ In the 2010s, disaffection with mainstream parties led many Italians to support the populist politics of former comedian Beppe Grillo, who led the Five-Star Movement until the early 2020s.

At critical times, in order to restore the country's international credibility or form a governing coalition in a “hung parliament”, the President of the Republic entrusted internationally renowned personalities with the task of leading technocratic governments – Mario Monti during the Eurozone crisis in 2011 and Mario Draghi during the political crisis of 2021. This was an effective, temporary crisis management strategy but did not alter prevailing political trends. Far-right leader Giorgia Meloni won the 2022 national election and formed a government with right-wing and far-right allies, raising questions about Italy's continued commitment to EU values. Meloni immediately sought international

legitimacy by pursuing cooperation with the US, EU institutions and other EU members. However, her political background and affiliation with the European (far) right have hampered her attempts to fully integrate into the EU's political mainstream and secure a leading role in the Union.⁴⁸

Italy's structural and political issues are compounded by its modest soft power. While the country's cultural legacy and some of its brands are renowned internationally, the outreach of its cultural and economic diplomacy is limited. A strong linguistic vector for cultural influence is missing. Outside Italy, only a few million people speak Italian as either a first or second language. Moreover, Italy has no public media or television channels in English or other international languages that present Italian perspectives or societal models abroad. As for economic diplomacy, Meloni's flagship initiative – the Mattei Plan for Africa – reflects the country's limited means. While the plan includes eighteen African countries and numerous goals, from green and digital transitions to sustainable agriculture, it suffers from insufficient funding: its total budget is only EUR 5.5 billion. Hence, Italy's modest soft power can hardly be converted into international political influence.

Against this difficult background, the rising geopolitical tensions of the 2020s have weakened some vectors of Italian foreign policy and key constituents of its middlepowerness. The “Eastern vector” was the most affected. Relations with Russia and the energy partnership collapsed after Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

Geopolitical considerations and political pressure from Western allies led the Meloni government not to renew the memorandum of understanding that Italy had signed with China in 2019 within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative.⁴⁹ In the ongoing Gaza crisis, Meloni departed from Italy's past balanced approach to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and took a pro-Israel stance, only to see Israeli forces fire on the Italian UNIFIL contingent during Israel's offensive in Lebanon.

Meloni's strategy of pursuing a closer political relationship with Trump and acting as a bridge between him and the EU was arguably her most

47 Brighi 2024.

48 Pirozzi 2025.

49 Andornino, Dossi and Caffarena 2025.

serious foreign policy setback. Not only did it create ambiguity about Rome's stance in the EU at a time of transatlantic tensions, but it also failed to shield Italian products from US tariffs, curtailed other foreign policy options and culminated in Trump's public criticism of Meloni when she allegedly refused to support his war against Iran.⁵⁰

Long-term structural issues and recent developments consequently cast doubt on Italy's long-assumed middlepowerness. For now, despite the country's ongoing loss of relative power, the material foundations for claiming this status remain in place. However, it is unclear whether and how Italian governments can translate this status into effective policy. Strategic use of Italy's membership and weight in the EU could compensate for its declining international influence. Yet this is hard to achieve without smart and effective political leadership and a long-term plan to address the country's structural weaknesses.

Conclusion: The limits of European middlepowerness

Germany, France and Italy exhibit different nuances of middlepowerness, reflecting different sources of power and historical legacies. However, they also share important features that deserve further attention. Despite the economic and financial disparities between them, they are all experiencing sustained challenges to their economic models. All of them largely rely on the EU's market and regulatory power to maximise their economic interests in an increasingly competitive international arena. At the same time, in all three countries, economic difficulties have created political opportunities for the far right, which tends to be averse to European solidarity and the very idea of EU integration.

With the partial exception of France, their military security depends on US support and guarantees that are no longer perceived as (fully) reliable, which creates an incentive to strengthen autonomous military, economic and diplomatic resources. All of them have a network of institutions that actively promote national culture abroad. However, factors such as the limited international outreach of the

German and Italian languages and the negative legacy of French colonialism act as major constraints on national soft power. These factors are compounded by widespread perceptions of Europe's overall marginalisation in global politics and of its double standards when dealing with international crises.⁵¹

Recognising their mutual interests and challenges, Germany, France and Italy have attempted to further consolidate their partnerships through recent bilateral agreements – the Franco-German treaty signed in Aachen in January 2019, the Franco-Italian Quirinal Treaty of November 2021, and the Italian-German Action Plan on Enhanced Strategic Cooperation signed in Rome in January 2026.⁵² These agreements create a framework for interactions at multiple levels of government in a wide range of policy areas, thereby reinforcing existing cooperation within the EU. They also provide avenues for coordinating foreign policy and thus maximise Europe's international influence.

This coordination can strengthen the EU's ability to address crises in its neighbourhood. However, pooling the resources of European middle powers does not necessarily make them more successful in dealing with larger powers, nor does it make the EU a great power. This has been illustrated by the crises with the US and Russia in recent years.

After Trump denounced the JCPOA and withdrew from it in 2018, Germany, France and the UK jointly attempted to salvage the agreement but proved unable to counter US economic might, ultimately leading to its demise. In the summer of 2025, the joint opposition of French, German and Italian leaders to Trump's tariffs did not significantly change the US stance, and the EU eventually accepted an unfavourable deal with Washington.

Likewise, Franco-German efforts to find a solution to the situation in eastern Ukraine in the Normandy format, alongside Russia and Ukraine, did not alter Russia's stance on Ukraine and were unable to prevent its full-scale invasion in 2022. The "coalition of the willing", created in 2025 and led by France and the UK – with Germany as co-chair and Italy among the participants – has displayed strong

50 Siddi and Prandin 2025; Fasola and Lucarelli 2024.

51 Huber 2025.

52 Siddi, Helwig and Iso-Markku 2022; Germany's Federal Foreign Office 2026.

political will but limited military capacity.⁵³ It has focused for the most part on keeping a reluctant Trump involved in Ukraine and on the post-war phase, which, however, will be determined primarily by how the war ends.

The ongoing efforts of France, Germany and Italy to strengthen their military resources and strategic autonomy could one day translate into a more effective foreign policy. This cannot be taken for granted, however. Current evidence suggests that European countries are unable to resolve crises autonomously even in their most immediate neighbourhood; pooling their resources and bringing other EU partners on board has not changed this. As Europe's relative decline continues, the risk is that even a united EU could come to resemble a middle power with limited international influence, playing second fiddle to major and more cohesive powers on all significant foreign policy issues. 🟣

⁵³ Karlsrud and Reykers 2026.

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