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THE NEW ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AND ITS GLOBAL PROJECTS

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Abstract

The transformation of the international system from a bipolar Cold War structure to a fluid and dynamic multipolar world has significantly altered the roles and responsibilities of major global actors. Under these new geopolitics, the European Union (EU) has shifted towards recalibrating its role on the global stage. No longer constrained by the limits of economic integration and regional peacebuilding, the EU has increasingly taken on a more expansive and ambitious role in international affairs. This reflects internal dynamics within the Union and pressures from the outside due to globalization, the rise of powers, and a waning liberal international order.

Historically conceived as a project for economic cooperation and conflict prevention among European nations, the EU has grown into a unique supranational entity with expansive influence in trade, environmental policy, digital governance, and normative diplomacy. As a regulatory superpower, the EU's requirements frequently require worldwide guidelines, especially in data protection, the reasonable opposition rule, and natural lifestyle sustainability. This "Brussels effect" enables the Union to extend power without conventional weapons use but instead on the strength of its internal market and governance model. In an increasingly competitive and interlinked world, the EU aims to be relevant and a key stakeholder in defining the new world order. Through successful partnerships, multilateral diplomacy, and its commitment to rule-based governance, the Union aims to foster stability, sustainability, and democracy. However, achieving this picture demands navigating a very intricate spider web of challenges featuring internal divisions, externally generated dangers, and the necessity of project autonomy without fatally antagonizing major allies. As the world continues to evolve, the EU's ability to act cohesively and effectively will determine whether it can shift from a largely regional power to a global power capable of influencing international norms and institutions.

Keywords: European Union, Global Projects, Environmental Leadership, Security Policy.

Introduction

The European Union (EU), originally envisioned as a mechanism for post-war economic recovery and political reconciliation, has undergone a profound transformation since its inception. Although economic integration remains a fundamental function, the Union has also been concerned with an increasingly wide range of political and strategic issues. In the last two decades, global and regional developments have pushed the EU to rethink its purpose and objectives – from a regional economic community driven by internal cohesion to a more assertive and forward-looking grasp engaged on the world stage. Several crises have been at center stage in this evolution. The euro area crisis made visible vulnerabilities in the euro area's economic governance and showed that further fiscal integration is needed. The United Kingdom's exit from the EU (Brexit) questioned the internal cohesion of the Union and external legitimacy (Baldini & Chelotti, 2022). At the same time, expanding authoritarianism in the EU's eastern and Southern peripheries, resurging Russia as a revisionist power, rising Chinese assertiveness globally, and shifting priorities of the United States have

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confirmed that EU needs to take greater charge of its strategic environment. A turning point in this journey was in 2016 when the EU adopted the EU Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy. This document outlined a new perspective on the stance taken by the Union in global affairs, with the main focus being deploying strategic autonomy, amplified resilience, and assertive partnership (Knutsen & Tvetbraten, 2022). It spelled out that the EU had to be "powerful in the world" if it could keep its values – democracy, human rights, and the rule of law safeguarded – while defending its own political, economic, and security interests. Since then, the EU has embarked on endeavors in diverse areas: defense diplomacy (e.g., PESCO), climate leadership (e.g., Green Deal), digital sovereignty, and crisis management. Such moves signal an adjustment within the Union that it can be more than a market power and a geopolitical player in a difficult international system.

Research Method and Methodology

We will use the comparative-historical method in the research process. In order to practically implement the goal set by the project, it is necessary to study the rich archival material in Georgia, to get to know the sources. Also, scientific and archival materials, official documents, press, reports will be processed. The research is conducted using a complex methodology: comparative-historical method, principle of historicism, content analysis, critical analysis, political monitoring, document analysis, systematic analysis.

Climate Diplomacy and Environmental Leadership

Climate change has emerged as one of the most pressing global challenges of the 21st century, and the European Union (EU) has positioned itself at the forefront of the international response. Knowing that environmental degradation raises both environmental and critical economic, social, and security risks, the EU has taken a forward-thinking and ambitious approach to climate governance. Its leadership here is a program-led decision and conscious choice to project influence through normative power and regulatory innovation, increasing its global relevance while driving its sustainability agenda.

At the heart of the EU's climate strategy is the European Green Deal, unveiled in 2019. This comprehensive policy framework outlines the Union's commitment to achieving climate neutrality by 2050 and reducing greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030 (compared to 1990 levels) (Eckert & Kovalevska, 2021). The Green Deal covers various sectors and initiatives, such as green transformation, sustainable agriculture (through the Farm to Fork Strategy), circular economy measures, biodiversity restoration, and green innovation. The ability of the EU to set up high environmental standards has also generated asymmetric international impact, widely referred to as the "Brussels effect," under which EU regulations influence markets and behavior across the globe.

One of the biggest global innovations of EU green leadership is its Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), which maintains imported products shrouded in the same carbon cost as EU products (Erdogdu, 2025). This is one policy that does not allow 'carbon leakage' to occur and allows the EU to have an impact on the world's climate by successfully merging trade policy and environment policy. At the global level, the EU has taken a lead in multilateral climate talks internationally. It played a key role in advocating for the Paris Agreement 2015 and is now pushing for higher global climate ambition (Höhne et al., 2021). The EU also promotes green finance, technology transfer, and sustainable development through cooperation arrangements with developing countries, a testimony that its climate diplomacy is two-way: towards ecology and geopolitics.

Promoting Democracy, Rule of Law and Human Rights

Among the characteristics of the external action of the European Union (EU) is that it is a normative power – a force that seeks to shape international relations through exporting values rather than exercising force (Jenichen, 2022). At the center of this role is the advance of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights as the EU's normative principles driving its foreign policy. They are not rhetoric but are deep-seated within the EU treaties and applied via a range of foreign policy institutional instruments and frameworks. The European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) are two of the most prominent examples of how the EU has utilized its normative power. These instruments seek to create political and institutional change in the neighboring and candidate states by providing concrete rewards in the form of market access, economic aid, and enhanced political relations for compliance with democratic standards, anti-corruption practices, judicial independence, and respect

for civil rights (Ačić & Grujić, 2023). The EU's strategy of conditionality is particularly visible in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership regions, where the prospect of future EU membership or integration serves as a powerful motivator for reform. Beyond institutional engagement, the EU heavily funds civil society, NGOs, independent media, and grassroots democracy movements. Through EU funding instruments such as the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and the Human Rights and Democracy Action Plan, the EU attempts to support local players to be able to encourage democratic accountability and defend core freedoms, including in very difficult political circumstances (Axyonova & Tsertsvadze, 2024).

Even if the efficacy of these approaches varies according to regional circumstances and the extent of local political will, the EU's persistent focus on values-based engagement distinguishes it from transactional or autocratic global powers. Its stable and long-term commitment to democratic governance remains the hallmark of its global actions, particularly during public contestation of such values globally.

Strategic Autonomy and Common Foreign Policy Ambitions

The European Union (EU) has more and more emphasized the notion of strategic autonomy in recent years, a shift which is built on expanding awareness that it must be in a position to protect its interests and values by itself in a volatile and unsure world. Strategic autonomy entails the EU's ambitions to act resolutely and jointly in foreign policy and security issues – not so much at the mercy of traditional allies, such as the United States of America (Jenichen, 2022). While transatlantic cooperation remains the core of the EU's security order, recent geopolitics—such as U.S. foreign policy unpredictability, the war in Ukraine, and the clash with China—have highlighted the need for a more autonomous Europe. At the heart of this strategic pivot lies the ambition to build a more integrated and effective Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The CFSP strives to harmonize the EU's foreign representation and diplomatic ventures and boost the Union's vitality in taking on international crises. Although foreign policy decisions within the EU still require unanimity among member states, efforts are underway to streamline processes and foster a more consistent and agile external posture. Several institutional initiatives reflect this evolution. The European Peace Facility (EPF) allows the EU to deliver military aid to partner countries, marking a significant shift in its approach to external security support (de Sousa & Duić, 2024). The Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) enhances transparency and alignment of national defense plans. In contrast, Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) enables joint defense projects and the creation of common capabilities by member states participating in the permanent structured cooperation. Although facing challenges like different national interests, divergent threat assessments, and strengths-weaknesses in defense spending the EU is increasingly heading towards being an autonomous and coherent entity. The aim is not to supplant NATO but to augment the EU's capacity to act when necessary through diplomatic, economic, and military means to protect its values, promote stability, and shape global affairs according to its priorities.

Digital Sovereignty and Technological Competitiveness

Technological innovation and control over digital infrastructure are more essential in the 21st century than ever before to mold geopolitical relationships. In response to this transition, the EU has chosen digital sovereignty and technological competitiveness as the strategic core agenda. Digital sovereignty refers to the capacity of the EU to make autonomous decisions in the digital space – guaranteeing that its technologies, infrastructure, and data are governed under European law, values, and strategic interests, rather than dictated by external agents, primarily those behemoth US-based technology giants or Chinese state-structured platforms. The Union has enacted influential legislative tools like the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Digital Markets Act (DMA) to this end. These acts tend to build a safer and more trustworthy digital environment by making big online companies accountable for illicit content, deceptive knowledge, and risky behavior. They also control the monopolistic business of the most powerful online companies, ensuring fair competition and protection of consumers. These acts of legislation are not only significant in Europe but have also established international standards, solidifying the EU as a regulatory superpower in the digital era. In the meantime, the EU is investing massively in digital infrastructure and innovation. Projects like the European Quantum Communication Infrastructure (EuroQCI) will give rise to ultra-secure communication networks and invest in innovative research in AI, cybersecurity, and semiconductor technology (van Deventer et al., 2022). This is with the objective of developing a strong European technology base and improving the EU's strategic autonomy and independency from foreign suppliers.

Digital sovereignty is not merely a technical project but a normative one. In the merging of privacy, transparency, and ethics into its digital policy, the EU wants to influence digital policy globally through European democratic values. To that end, it wants to be the pioneer in a rapid frenzied technological evolution and impart form to the future digital world based on European values of human dignity, fairness, and inclusiveness.

Trade, Development, and Global Partnerships: Trade policy is probably the strongest instrument that the European Union (EU) possesses to exert influence and shape the international order. Being the world's largest single market and one of its top economic blocs, the EU exercises behemoth influence in world trade diplomacy. This economic leverage allows the Union to be in a position to offer an alternative trade policy that transcends traditional market access and tariff reduction. Recent EU trade agreements integrate legally binding human rights, environmental protection, labor standards, and sustainable development as part of the overall EU normative agenda (Poletti et al., 2021). By incorporating these values into economic relations, the EU is a global leader in ethical globalization. In addition to trade, the EU role in development cooperation and humanitarian assistance has become a central feature of its strategy of external action. The EU and the member states constitute the worldwide largest official development assistance (ODA) provider (Erdem Türkelli, 2021). Through means like Neighborhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) and European Civil Protection- Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO), the EU applies focused support for poverty reduction, education, health, gender mainstreaming, and institutional capacity shaping in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean (Pope, & Weisner, 2023). A key flagship initiative in this area was the Global Gateway strategy, which was launched in 2021 as a response to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The EU's Global Gateway targets raising €300 billion for sustainable and high-quality infrastructure in partner countries (Carrai, 2025). Unlike the BRI, the EU stresses transparency, good governance, and democratic values, focusing on building mutually advantageous partnerships that support global development and promote strategic autonomy.

By combining trade and development in its policy approach, the EU advances its economic interests and global stability, democratic change, and European geopolitical leverage. These partnerships facilitate the EU's acting as a bridge between developed and developing countries, making it look like a responsible and forward-looking global actor.

Crisis Management, Security, and Migration Governance: With a more complex and volatile international environment, the European Union (EU) has enlarged its crisis management, security, and migration governance within a more general policy framework to improve resilience and global responsibility. EU's capacity to respond to external crises has increased greatly through CSDP missions with civilian and military operations (Harris, 2023). These operations promote peace, stabilize fragile countries, support organizational reform, and enhance border security in the Western Balkans, Sahel, Horn of Africa, and the Mediterranean. For example, tasks like EUNAVFOR MED (to contain migrations and to protect the lives of the people) and EUCAP Sahel (to establish police organs of West Africa). Migration management has become one of the EU's most politicized and strategically important policy areas. The refugee crisis of 2015 revealed major failures of the EU's internal coordination and asylum system in such a stark and debilitating fashion that it caused major political discord amongst member states (Kang, 2021). To counter this, the EU has strengthened the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), enhanced funding for Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, and rectified shortcomings in screening and return procedures. Externally, the EU has adopted energetic migration diplomacy, creating partnerships with the countries of origin and transit to manage migratory flows and fight against trafficking networks. Prominent examples include the 2016 EU–Turkey Statement, a bid to limit irregular migration from Turkey to Europe, and cooperation agreements with North and West African countries established under the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa. These deals attempt to address the root causes of the movement – poverty, conflict, climate change while building up border control and repatriation methods.

However, the EU still struggles reconciling its humanitarian obligations with security-driven requirements. This tension is felt internally, impacting the EU's internal solidarity, and externally, shaping its global image as a normative and humanitarian actor and migrants' governance, a test case for the EU's values and strategic coherence in the global arena.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the growth of the European Union from a post-second world war economic recovery movement into a global full-fledged actor represents a major increase in capacity and ambition. No longer is

the EU just an internal integrator; it is increasingly trying to make its mark on the international system on many different fronts. By means of climate diplomacy, normative leadership, digital sovereignty, trade policy, development cooperation, or crisis management, the EU tries to become one of the new multipolar world's great powers. Its system of government, which mixes supranational governance and intergovernmental cooperation, differs from world powers.

This shift in approach is not only in the defense posture but is clothed in becoming an autonomous world-shaping player. The EU has taken a far more ambitious approach in the context of an international order increasingly dominated by rising authoritarianism, great power competition, and declining multilateralism. Some of these policies, such as the European Green Deal, the Digital Markets Act, the Global Gateway, and more ambitious Common Security and Defense Policy missions, show the Union's commitment to placing international norms at odds in the defense of its interest within the international society. The EU's dependence on values-based diplomacy based on democracy, human rights, and the rule of law is a fundamental attribute of its foreign action that makes it stand out from coercive or transactional foreign policy. However, the international role of the EU is not untrammelled. Domestic disintegration, competing national interests, and vulnerability of hard power resources dilute cohesion and efficacy. Moreover, the balance between strategic autonomy and securing transatlantic relations, mainly with NATO and the United States, remains a policy issue. Nonetheless, the EU's advanced world policy is built upon a vision: of a proud, standing tall Europe that shall be able to defend its peoples, provide a contribution towards stability, and make a mark among world leadership. Since power equilibrium everywhere in the world is in constant flux, the EU's capacity to exhibit and cooperate shall play a determining role for the EU's consistent influence during the 21st century.

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