

# WHAT GRAND STRATEGY FOR EUROPE?

## THREE COMPETING VISIONS AND ONE PROPOSAL

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# CENTRE FOR SECURITY, DIPLOMACY AND STRATEGY

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## Abstract

European leaders have undertaken to set out the strategic agenda of the European Union (EU) for the years ahead, but dysfunctional politics across Europe and aggravating international crises risk stifling their resolve. This In-Depth Paper argues that high-level strategy making entails high-level political responsibility. Empowering Europe to meet citizens' expectations is critical to the legitimacy of the EU itself. The EU needs a "grand strategy" approach to align consequent means to attainable policy goals. This In-Depth Paper contributes to the elaboration of the EU's strategic agenda by outlining and testing competing strategic perspectives – Shaping Power, Transatlantic Partner and Sovereign Europe – building on an original matrix that allows one to compare their core elements. This exercise aims to support a strategic debate, which is an integral part of the effort to build a European strategic community and culture. The In-Depth Paper also delivers a distinct strategic proposition, outlining broad priorities for the EU to deal with several, connected challenges and transitions.

## Introduction

As the European Union's (EU) institutional cycle comes to an end, European leaders and EU bodies ponder the strategic priorities that should guide the Union for the next few years. With a view to defining the EU Strategic Agenda 2024-2029, the October 2023 Granada Declaration of the European Council boldly stated: 'we will set our long-term ambitions and the ways to achieve them. We will address key questions related to our priorities and policies as well as our capacity to act'.<sup>1</sup> In short, this ought to be grand strategy time. However, dysfunctional European politics and aggravating international challenges risk stifling Europe's strategic aspirations and planning.

Past the remarkable mobilisation to deal with the COVID pandemic and to counter Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the EU has struggled to cope with spiralling instability across its neighbourhood, from the Sahel to the Caucasus, and has split in the face of the Israel-Hamas war. There is little agreement among EU member states on how to equip the Union with the resources it needs to compete in an unforgiving strategic environment and on the reforms that would make EU enlargement possible. The prospect of the possible return of Donald Trump to the White House is raising profound questions on the resilience of the transatlantic partnership, and of the EU itself. Meanwhile, Eurosceptic forces are surging anew in various member states, casting a shadow on the scope for EU-level consensus-building and threatening Europe's core values. In a world of geopolitical headwinds and acute regional and global challenges, however, the EU simply cannot afford any self-inflicted damage. High-level strategy making entails high-level political responsibility. Empowering the EU to thrive and meet citizens' expectations will determine its future legitimacy and, therefore, political sustainability.

An earlier CSDS In-Depth Paper made the case that the EU can and should measure up to the scale of the systemic challenges it faces through a grand strategic approach.<sup>2</sup> The latter is not just about a single strategic blueprint but a culture of long-term and integrated planning, grounded in adequate resources. Today, the EU must take the next step in this process. A sound strategic debate requires clarity on the worldviews and assumptions that inform it, on related priorities, as well as on competing strategic propositions.

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1 European Council, "The Granada Declaration", 6 October 2023.

2 Grevi, G., "Shockwaves. How does the war in Ukraine impact the EU's grand strategy?", *CSDS In-Depth Paper*, No. 5, March 2023.

This CSDS In-Depth Paper contributes to the debate about the EU's strategic agenda for the years ahead by outlining and testing contending perspectives.<sup>3</sup> The three strategic propositions addressed in what follows – Shaping Power, Transatlantic Partner and Sovereign Europe – are not the only conceivable ones, but those principally informing current policy-oriented debates about Europe in the world.<sup>4</sup> However, they are rarely presented in terms of overarching approaches, and hardly ever subjected to consistent scrutiny. This contribution offers a starting point to tease out different worldviews and assess their main policy implications, thereby strengthening awareness and clarity for the strategic choices ahead.<sup>5</sup> Strategic approaches are presented here in a deliberately stark way, to convey their main features. In the real world, of course, no grand strategy fully matches a textbook paradigm. All the more so at the EU level, any strategic approach combines different strands of thinking, involves trade-offs and needs to provide flexibility for course correction.

The review of competing grand strategies builds on an analytical matrix (see Annex I) that helps us compare them, by tackling some of the core dimensions that a viable European strategic approach should articulate. The review is also accompanied by a concise assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of respective strategic propositions, as well as of the opportunities and threats that they face (SWOT). This critique reports the main arguments deployed to support, question or oppose different grand strategies. The concluding section outlines a broad proposal by the author, which adds to the three competing strategic paradigms and offers pointers to craft Europe's strategic agenda for the years ahead.

3 This approach broadly draws on earlier contributions assessing the competing grand strategies of, respectively, the US and the EU. See Posen, B. and Ross, A.L., "Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategies", *International Security*, 21(3) (Winter 1996-1997): pp. 5-53; and Vennesson, P., "Competing Visions for the European Union Grand Strategy", *European Foreign Affairs Review*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2010): pp. 57-75.

4 Other positions can of course be detected in European political and academic debates, from the conception of a normative, cosmopolitan Europe transcending power politics to narratives evoking an illiberal, isolationist Europe. These approaches deserve further scrutiny because they reflect ideas and agendas that have played, or may play, an important part in shaping the EU's purpose and priorities.

5 The description of competing strategic visions encapsulates years of debates on the strategic direction of the EU in the world, with a focus on recent developments. The way in which the core arguments of respective approaches are condensed and presented here is the author's own elaboration based on an extensive set of sources that cannot be referenced in this paper due to space.

## Shaping Power: Peace through Cooperation

The “Shaping Power”<sup>6</sup> grand strategy is chiefly concerned with the unravelling of the international order and the ensuing risks. Many of the advocates of this approach do not ignore the return of geopolitical competition and recognise that the rise of an increasingly assertive China poses systemic challenges. However, they maintain that the biggest threat for European and global security stems from the logic of competition that side-lines the logic of cooperation. On this view, power politics is eroding multilateralism and preventing collective action on the scale necessary to tackle massive transnational challenges, from climate change to development or global health.

The overarching priority of the Shaping Power grand strategy is to contain the surge of geopolitical competition and strengthen partnerships and multilateralism, taming the rule of power with the power of rules. This is clearly an element of continuity with decades of reflections on the EU’s role in the world, as an actor aiming to anchor peace in a thick, rules-based international order. Conversely, the ambition to export European liberal values to other countries, which drove past enlargement and neighbourhood policies, is less noticeable than it was, and applies more selectively. The main priority of the Shaping Power grand strategy today is arguably to strengthen collective resilience and stability through multilateral cooperation.

The Shaping Power grand strategy harbours a strong normative dimension with some cosmopolitan elements to it, in that it privileges working for peace, human security, development and planetary sustainability, over sheer calculations of power. Engaging into dialogue helps contain anarchy and violence. Multilateralism is therefore not just a means to the EU’s own ends, but a worthy goal in itself. At the same time, advocates of a Shaping Power grand strategy appear less wedded to institutionalised and inclusive forms of multilateralism, and more open to mobilise variable formats of cooperation, depending on the goals, the issues and the relevant partners. The Shaping Power grand strategy suggests that the EU should continue to uphold democracy and liberal values both at home and abroad, but in ways that do not preclude cooperation with undemocratic regimes.

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<sup>6</sup> This definition encompasses elements stemming from the concepts of Civilian Power Europe and Normative Power Europe, among others. However, the larger notion of “shaping power” seems better suited to express the growing awareness among the advocates of this strategic proposition of the need to complement the EU’s normative commitments with a further degree of pragmatism, and stamina, in the face of a challenging world.



Proponents of a Shaping Power grand strategy recognise that the transatlantic partnership stands in a league of its own but criticise the recurrent unilateral twists in US foreign policy. They are open to deepening the transatlantic partnership but aim to pursue other vectors of engagement too, including with unlike-minded partners and China. In other words, a Shaping Power grand strategy does not require the EU to fully align with the US as part of a western front confronting revisionist challengers. However, most Shaping Power supporters would agree that, when confronted with outright aggression such as with Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine, the transatlantic community must close ranks and push back.

Advancing the strategic autonomy of the EU is not a central tenet of the Shaping Power grand strategy. The latter is directed to harness the distinctive features of the EU as a rules-based, multilateral actor more than to build "great power Europe". Shaping Power advocates would not deny that the EU needs to prepare for competition but they instinctively favour doing so by diversifying partnerships and cooperation formats. Shaping Power remains a grand strategy of engagement, even though there is a growing understanding that the latter needs to be backed up by adequate assets to carry more weight. Industrial and trade policies can be part of this toolbox, provided that they are compatible with multilateral rules.

Most of the proponents of a Shaping Power grand strategy would agree that Europeans should strengthen their military capabilities and be prepared to use them, albeit always in accordance with, and in support of, international law. The EU needs to be a "civilian power" with more muscle to provide a stronger contribution not only to effective multilateralism and the security of others, but also to its own. However, under this approach, the EU is not the insurance of last resort when it comes to Europe's defence – the US and NATO are. The EU should invest more in defence, with Europeans better coordinating defence spending and taking a comprehensive approach to security. While NATO is responsible for collective defence, the Shaping Power approach focuses on enhancing the EU's capacity to carry out crisis management and peace-building tasks, in particular in the EU neighbourhood.

The Shaping Power grand strategy puts a lot of emphasis on the connection between what the EU is – a rules-based Union – and what the EU does on the global stage. This is why proponents of Shaping Power tend to support the deepening of European integration, in line with the values that are at the foundations of the so-called "European project". Following Russia's aggression towards Ukraine, the Shaping Power approach clearly encompasses EU enlargement to Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans, but many in this camp would underscore that completing this process is subject to thorough reforms, both in candidate countries and at EU level. The principal



concern remains preserving both the EU's decision-making capacity and its core normative features, since they are both central dimensions of Europe's power in the world.

## Assessment

### Strengths

- The Shaping Power grand strategy builds on the comparative advantages of the EU as a rules-based actor and a major economic power, and on its strong EU institutional competences;
- It stresses the EU's distinct vocation to tame sheer power through rules;
- It reconciles the traditional emphasis on the EU's normative and regulatory power with more attention to hard power capabilities;
- Beyond the enlargement process, transformative aspirations are not driving relations with partner countries, which allows for more pragmatism.

### Weaknesses

- Building on the EU's comparative advantage does not necessarily amount to equipping the EU to face the world as it is;
- The Shaping Power grand strategy falls short of speaking the language of power because it stakes too much on strengthening a multilateral architecture that most other powers are not really invested in;
- Concerning defence issues, there is not enough emphasis on the urgent need to enhance Europe's military capabilities, while relying almost exclusively on the US for the defence of Europe is naive;
- The Shaping Power grand strategy fails to grasp the structural impact of Russia's neo-imperial agenda and of the rise of a systemic challenger like China.

### Opportunities

- The Shaping Power grand strategy can tap into the growing, and largely unmet, demand for international dialogue and cooperation to address shared challenges;
- It provides Europe with a unique selling point among competing narratives and offers, as a convening or stabilising power seeking to mitigate geopolitical confrontation and reach out to all those willing to engage to deliver solutions;
- Backing up this strategy with adequate resources to deliver global public goods would bolster both the credibility of the Union and its resilience, and pave the way for deeper partnerships with countries from the so-called “Global South”.

### Threats

- Structural changes in the global strategic landscape are narrowing, or closing, the window of opportunity for a Shaping Power grand strategy. Great power rivalry is the new normal and will, if anything, intensify;
- Russia’s war in Ukraine shows that hard power is essential to push back against aggressors;
- The rise of an assertive China, carrying in many respects an alternative vision of the international order, not only precludes prospects for the reform of multilateralism but threatens EU values and interests;
- The pillars of a Shaping Power approach, such as the single market or the digital and green transitions, are domains of strategic competition too;
- Shaping Power, albeit upgraded, cannot thrive in a geopolitical world unless it endorses a geopolitical mindset or sides neatly with like-minded partners, chiefly the US.

## **Transatlantic Partner: Security through Alliance**

The “Transatlantic Partner” grand strategy starts from the assumption that, in a fragmented world of power politics, the transatlantic partnership only gains in importance, whether to protect Europe or to help it project its values and interests worldwide. This partnership is not just the most important asset for Europe in a challenging world, but is constitutive of Europe’s own political order. Proponents of a Transatlantic Partner grand strategy argue that, as great power rivalry is back, the EU must close ranks with the US. The principal drivers of this assessment are

the return of Russia's imperialism and the emergence of China as the only systemic challenger to the US and to the liberal international order.

Under a Transatlantic Partner approach there is very little daylight between the strategic interests and priorities of Europe and those of the US. Both aim to uphold shared liberal and democratic values, their economic partnership is by far broader and deeper than any other, their threat assessment is very close, and they belong to a solid, highly institutionalised security community. This should be the bedrock for a comprehensive bilateral agenda that helps shape multilateral affairs in line with shared priorities. Europe and the US are each other's indispensable partners in countering Russia's aggression against Ukraine. As for dealing with China, the Transatlantic Partner grand strategy recognises the need to balance competition, cooperation and rivalry, but takes a tougher approach than alternative propositions. Europe's ultimate interest is establishing a common position with the US and other like-minded partners to tackle China's revisionist ambitions and unfair economic policies.

Political values play a big role in a Transatlantic Partner grand strategy. Many of the proponents of this approach tend to take a binary approach to normative debates and subscribe to the idea that the contrast between democracy and autocracy is a defining cleavage in international affairs. Concerns with North-South divides about the international economic order and issues of fairness, such as regarding the development and climate agendas, are relatively less pronounced. In short, the focus of the Transatlantic Partner approach is East, not South. Upholding the rules-based liberal international order is an important pillar of the Transatlantic Partner grand strategy, but with a clear emphasis on working among like-minded democracies to strengthen norms and formats that fit their preferences.

Advocates of the Transatlantic Partner strategic approach would recognise that Europe and America do not always see eye-to-eye, for example concerning respective industrial policies. However, they consider such differences marginal compared to the existential value of the partnership. Most supporters of this strategy recognise that the EU should play a central role in the transatlantic partnership to give Europeans scale to co-shape the transatlantic agenda. Under this grand strategy, however, the EU is not necessarily meant to cover the full scope of the partnership. NATO's role as the foundation of European defence and security at large is undisputable. Europeans should also work with the US through flexible coalitions on issues and in theatres where the EU may not be involved as such.

The Transatlantic Partner grand strategy regards European strategic autonomy as a pipe-dream at best, a threat to transatlantic solidarity at worst and a poor use of resources anyway. On the economic and industrial front, this approach aims to deepen not only the EU single market but also the transatlantic one by further opening it up to mutual investment and promoting regulatory convergence. The objective is to achieve unparalleled market power at the transatlantic level to reinforce resilience and shape the rules of the global economy. From this vantage point, the EU should focus its economic security strategy on de-risking relations with geopolitical competitors.

The Transatlantic Partner grand strategy prescribes boosting defence spending in Europe to ensure fairer burden-sharing within NATO. Enhancing the readiness, deployability and interoperability of European armed forces within the Alliance is critical. Most of the advocates of a Transatlantic Partner approach in Europe do not prioritise EU-level cooperation on defence matters. Limited initiatives to strengthen the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB) can be considered, but the bulk of Europe's defensive efforts should be through NATO or through direct cooperation between European countries and the US. The EU should instead equip itself to be an effective security provider in its neighbourhood, not least to relieve the US from an excessive range of commitments.

Under a Transatlantic Partner grand strategy, the global role of the EU is calibrated in accordance with a broader transatlantic assessment of priority issues and areas of engagement. The Indo-Pacific has rapidly climbed the priority ladder of the Transatlantic Partner grand strategy, which foresees greater European engagement in the region through broad-spectrum partnerships with like-minded actors in particular. The inter-theatre perspective, whereby US partners in Europe contribute to stability in the Indo-Pacific, and vice-versa, as both regions face growing security challenges, is a component of this wider strategic approach.

The Transatlantic Partner grand strategy frames the EU as a product of the hegemonic stability historically provided by the US, an embodiment of liberal values and a pillar of the wider architecture of the international liberal order. As such, the purpose of cooperation at the EU level is not pursuing a unique model of value-based supranational integration or establishing a fully-fledged "power Europe". It is enhancing the prosperity, security and resilience of Europeans through the single market, economies of scale and regulatory power. Deepening European integration is therefore intended to make the EU a more effective economic and diplomatic actor, and contributor to a larger Western strategy. This grand strategy favours EU enlargement as a geostrategic move to extend stability, prosperity and values across Europe, pushing back Russia's neo-imperial designs. Some reform of the EU's policies and budget will be in order

to manage the economic implications of enlargement. However, excessive ambitions of far-reaching EU institutional reform should not interfere with progress on the enlargement agenda.

## Assessment

### Strengths

- Through the partnership with the US and other like-minded actors, the Transatlantic Partner grand strategy multiplies Europe's power;
- The transatlantic alliance guarantees the defence of Europe at a time of growing and direct security threats;
- The Transatlantic Partner grand strategy not only meets Europe's priority interests, but is also consistent with its core values;
- As Europeans and Americans share the deepest economic relationship and the strongest military alliance in the world, it only makes sense to build on these foundations.

### Weaknesses

- This strategic approach rests almost entirely on America's commitment to Europe, which is not axiomatic given both the toxic partisanship in US domestic politics and questions about America's strategic bandwidth;
- As Washington turns to Asia, it is unclear whether the US will continue to be willing and able to deal with multiple crises in the EU's neighbourhood all at once;
- Dependence on the US in security affairs has fed a complacent strategic culture in Europe;
- On the economic front, the priorities of the US and the EU often differ, not least as protectionist feelings in America are on the rise.

### Opportunities

- Following the war in Ukraine, there is momentum for Europeans to take more responsibility for their security and develop a strong European pillar within NATO;
- Europeans and Americans should join forces through public investment and regulatory convergence to strengthen their technological leadership in key domains such as AI;
- Deepening rules-based cooperation among like-minded partners, in ways that are open to others, would send a message of solidarity and strength to the world, help anchor middle powers to the West and deter the revisionist designs of authoritarian powers.

### Threats

- Binary views of the world pitting democracies against authoritarian regimes ignore that alignments in the international community are fluid and shifting, depending on the item on the global agenda;
- The Transatlantic Partnership strategy tends to neglect the scepticism or resentment that part of the international community harbours against the US and Europe;
- Such an approach might compound great power rivalry too, instead of seeking to defuse it;
- Political developments in the US point to resurgent populist and nationalist narratives in the run up to the 2024 presidential election. The potential victory of Donald Trump would likely produce deep divisions across the Atlantic, and possibly within Europe, largely debasing this strategic approach.

## **Sovereign Europe: Resilience through Strength**

The “Sovereign Europe” grand strategy posits that the international system is multipolar and increasingly unstable. In this context, the US remain Europe’s closest partner but nobody will ultimately protect Europe’s interests if Europeans do not. On the global stage, multi-dimensional competition and scope for cooperation co-exist, but the latter is shrinking. With the exception of Russia, major powers are not necessarily bent on confrontation, but fail to deploy collective leadership to reform the international order. The rise of China changes the global equation. Dealing with Beijing requires a mix of firmness and engagement, not principled antagonism. The US-China rivalry is of major concern because it affects European interests and threatens to spark a conflict with severe global repercussions. From a Sovereign Europe vantage point, the emergence of a bipolar world is both unlikely, because most powers are unwilling to take

sides, and undesirable. Such a development would marginalise Europe and further weaken the capacity of the international community to deal with shared challenges.

A Sovereign Europe grand strategy aims to equip the EU to shape its future in ways that are not defined by, or merely dependent on, others. There is a broad understanding that, in most policy domains, this does not mean becoming independent but setting clear EU priorities and acquiring more capacity to achieve them. Strengthening Europe's own power base, from the single market to industrial policy and military capabilities, is therefore a key priority under the Sovereign Europe approach, and a condition for Europe to enhance its clout and manage interdependence on the global stage.

Proponents of a Sovereign Europe strategy tend to emphasise Europe's values as an important dimension of Europe's identity and profile in the world. From the human-centric regulation of new technologies to the reform of the welfare state and the EU's unique experience of supranational integration, Europe is defined by a distinct normative and political culture, which is essential to preserve. The Sovereign Europe grand strategy encompasses different views on the place of values in EU foreign policy but, on balance, the normative dimension is not necessarily central to Europe's external projection. There is therefore a distinction between the EU polity, which is value-based, and the international system, where power politics often prevail and the EU must be prepared to deal with the world as it is, and defend its interests.

In this turbulent world, advocates of a Sovereign Europe strategy are clear that there is no more important partnership than that with the US. However, this partnership should not define Europe's approach to other powers or global regions. The transatlantic partnership plays a central role for Europe's security through NATO and should be advanced across the board where interests converge, but it should be a partnership of equals. Europeans should not be at the receiving end of priorities and policies crafted in Washington and shared for *ex-post* consultation. For Sovereign Europe supporters, the EU should be a fully-fledged partner to the US, not a follower.

The goal to foster Europe's strategic autonomy is central to a Sovereign Europe grand strategy. While they may differ on its precise definition, there is a broad understanding among Sovereign Europe advocates that strategic autonomy entails the ability of the EU to first set its priorities and then pursue them in cooperation with others when possible, and on its own if needed. Under this approach, the concept of strategic autonomy applies across all policy areas (i.e. open strategic autonomy in economic matters), well beyond the defence domain where it originated from.



The Sovereign Europe grand strategy recognises the centrality of NATO for European defence. However, it aims for Europeans to provide the bulk of the effort to guarantee their security within the Atlantic alliance. While appetite for external interventions is very low, this strategic position includes enhancing Europe's ability to operate autonomously across the full spectrum of crisis management contingencies in the regions surrounding Europe, when necessary. Besides boosting defence spending, defence cooperation at the EU-level should be advanced. Strengthening the EDTIB is crucial because it contributes simultaneously to restoring Europe's military capabilities, to Europe's economic competitiveness and technological sovereignty, and to the resilience of Europe's critical infrastructure.

The Sovereign Europe grand strategy frames the EU as an actor with global interests and reach, but there are variations among its proponents on the scope of Europe's global projection. Some emphasise the EU's market and regulatory power as the primary vector of its influence. Others argue that Europe should be more invested in securing its global interests, including through military means such as its maritime presence. All would agree that the EU should have its own position and voice on all major subjects on the global agenda. It should also engage with like-minded partners worldwide on issues of economic and infrastructure security. As a global actor, the EU should define the terms of its own partnerships with major powers like China and with middle powers, while consulting with the US and others on shared approaches where possible.

Advocates of a Sovereign Europe approach maintain that strengthening cooperation and pooling resources across the board at the EU-level is vital for Europe to uphold its global interests. There is no consensus, however, on the extent of the reforms required to empower the Union, with some favouring an intergovernmental model and others arguing that the EU's institutional core, and competences, should be empowered. A Sovereign Europe grand strategy encompasses EU enlargement as part of the larger goal to rebuild the European security order following Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Enlargement should however in no way affect the decision-making capacity or the political and economic cohesion of the Union. Given this premise, some anticipate that, were the necessary institutional and budgetary reforms not to be agreed, cooperation through concentric circles or variable geometry could be established to reconcile the EU's widening and deepening.

## Assessment

### Strengths

- The Sovereign Europe grand strategy is the best suited to ensure that Europe deploys its huge untapped potential on the international stage, thereby securing its interests;
- In a world of heavyweights, Europe is shrinking and it needs unity to acquire scale, withstand competition and coercion, and help to address global challenges;
- Such a strategy would make of the EU a better partner to its friends;
- A sovereign Europe would also be in the position to deliver the benefits that citizens expect, thereby contributing to the political cohesion of the Union.

### Weaknesses

- The Sovereign Europe grand strategy works in theory but not in practice;
- Divisions among member states and differences between their strategic cultures remain too big to enable strategic agenda-setting;
- Europeans lack the means, in particular concerning the military, intelligence, natural resources and, in some fields, cutting-edge technologies;
- A grand strategy predicated on bridging long-standing divides, mobilising weak political will and harnessing limited resources is not a viable way to turn the EU into a fully-fledged power.

### Opportunities

- Years of “polycrisis” have exposed divisions among member states but demonstrated that, when Europeans work together, they can deal effectively with systemic challenges;
- A Sovereign Europe grand strategy can help turn significant, if as yet piecemeal, progress – from the Next Generation EU instrument to rising defence spending and major industrial programmes – into structured, long-term joint undertakings;
- If the EU and the US remain aligned, the Sovereign Europe grand strategy is the best response to American demands for Europe to take more responsibility in security and global affairs. If the 2024 US presidential election delivers a victory for Donald Trump, the Sovereign Europe approach will be the best course of action for the EU to cope with a nationalist and unilateralist administration.

### Threats

- There is a strong risk that the polycrisis will pull Europeans apart, accentuating economic and strategic divergence within the EU. Pursuing a Sovereign Europe grand strategy would therefore backfire, exposing and exacerbating differences among member states;
- Affirming this strategy would risk alienating most interlocutors in the US, weakening the transatlantic partnership while delivering little added-value for the EU;
- This mainly interest-driven agenda would undermine the EU's credentials as a normative actor, validating allegations that the EU just seeks to punch its weight like other major powers, while the international order falters.

## **Conclusion: Guidelines for EU Grand Strategy**

While severely challenged by cascading crises, the EU has often defied expectations about its demise. However, there is nothing preordained about its power or survival. They rather depend on political will and cohesion, a shared sense of purpose and adequate strategic planning to empower Europe to face the world ahead. Outlining and assessing competing visions of EU grand strategy can help stimulate a more effective and responsible European strategy-making process. Mapping the scope of the debate highlights the risks and trade-offs that surround grand slogans or theories, as well as helping to deal with complexity. Of course, divisions among member states, short-term national or institutional agendas, as well as group think, inevitably affect strategy-making at the EU level. However, it would be self-defeating if these were the main factors shaping Europe's grand strategy.

The EU needs a vibrant debate to chart its course for the next five years. To contribute to this process, which is also an integral part of the effort to build a truly European strategic community, the contours of a strategic agenda for Europe are proposed below. This agenda builds on the analytical matrix that structured the three paradigms outlined in this In-Depth Paper – Shaping Power, Transatlantic Partner and Sovereign Europe. It aims to strengthen Europe's security and cohesion, empowering the Union both to cope with direct threats and to pursue a cooperative agenda on the global stage.

## Whatever it takes – Progress through unity

A comprehensive review of the direction of change in international affairs points to the drift from a world of incremental, if contested, progress to one of systemic regression on the normative, geopolitical, economic and ecological fronts. Geopolitical tensions and major conflicts consume the international order, turning zero-sum calculations into net losses for all countries, large and small. Given current trends, a regressive world is a business-as-usual scenario.<sup>7</sup> Averting it should be Europe's defining purpose on the world stage. That requires a grand strategy that equips Europe to brace itself for competition and confrontation, and take much more responsibility for its own defence, while striving for cooperation to deliver global public goods.

The EU can put its normative proposition to good use, if it is consistent in upholding and practicing its stated values, at home and abroad. The paradigm of individual and social progress not only underpins the foundations of democratic polities and European integration, but can and should contribute to human security, rights and development worldwide. Conversely, regression has historically fed forces of oppression, imperialism and war. Multilateralism should be the EU's option of first resort, even if not necessarily the only vector of cooperation.

Not just preserving, but deepening the transatlantic partnership is a priority for Europe. For the partnership to prosper, however, it takes two strong engines, powering in the same direction if sometimes through different routes. A viable Europe is one that punches its weight and delivers for its citizens. Short of that, political divisions within and between member states might widen, which would turn the EU into a weaker partner and make it more vulnerable to foreign interference. Europeans cannot simply rely on a strategy of outright dependence on the US; they should continue to build their shared sovereignty. In defence matters, it is of essence to strengthen the EDTIB, triggering joint investment and procurement on an adequate scale and leveraging synergies with other industrial efforts at the forefront of innovation. A stronger Europe would not just be the best platform for a close partnership with a broadly like-minded US, but also the principal hedge for Europe if Washington turns nationalist and isolationist after the next presidential election.

The EU does not have the luxury to choose between global and regional commitments, but it must calibrate its resources and added-value to match competing priorities. Clearly, a destabilised

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<sup>7</sup> Grevi, G., "Conclusion: averting a regressive world – global trends and Europe's leadership", in G. Grevi (ed.), *Forging Europe's leadership. Global trends, Russian aggression and the risk of a regressive world*, *Foundation for European Progressive Studies*, October 2023.

neighbourhood hampers the EU's global projection. The EU should be a full-spectrum partner and a principal security-provider in its extended neighbourhood; a stabilising force in key global regions; a strategic or transactional partner for middle powers (depending on the common ground); and a major rule-shaping power on the multilateral stage. In this context, the EU should urgently step up to deliver maximum support to Ukraine for as long as necessary. A more resilient EU should also calibrate a far more joined up approach to China, firmly defending European interests and upholding the rules-based international order while pursuing cooperation to manage interdependence and shared challenges. Standing up for international law is a strong proposition connecting global and regional issues, and one that requires consistency, from Ukraine and the Indo-Pacific to the Israel-Palestine conflict and future peace process.

There is no "power Europe" without a more politically and economically integrated EU. Economic growth is the backbone of grand strategy. Europeans must double-down on leveraging the EU as a growth multiplier, establishing a firm roadmap to complete the single market. They should also start-up or scale-up joint funds to invest in key technological sectors and deliver European public goods. An adequate European fiscal policy framework and a fiscal capacity at the EU-level are critical tools to unleash Europe's (geo)economic power. This is also a pre-condition for sustaining the EU's regulatory power. Europeans should tackle the enlargement agenda – a defining priority for the next decade – as part of the strategic undertaking to re-design the European security order and build a stronger and larger Union. For the EU, the alternative is not between deepening and enlarging, but between deepening and faltering.

## ANNEX I - What Grand Strategy for Europe?

	<b>Shaping Power</b>	<b>Transatlantic Partner</b>	<b>Sovereign Europe</b>	<b>Whatever it takes</b>
<b>Worldview and threat assessment</b>	The international order is unravelling and competition sidelines cooperation.	Great power rivalry is the new normal and US underwrites Europe's stability.	The multipolar world is marked by weaponised interdependence, and the scope for cooperation shrinks.	Multiple trends point to a shift from a world of incremental progress to systemic regression.
<b>Core priorities</b>	Tame geopolitics through dialogue and rules, while strengthening Europe's resilience.	Build a Transatlantic agenda to oppose revisionist powers and shape the international order.	Empower Europe to take charge of its future by strengthening its power base for international stability.	Avert a regressive world and empower Europe to compete or push back, while cooperating.
<b>Values and Multilateralism</b>	Focus on peace, development and sustainability with a principled commitment to multilateralism, albeit with flexibility on formats.	Focus on the democracy-authoritarianism divide and support the rules-based international order, mainly working with likeminded actors.	Uphold values at home, focus on Europe's interests abroad and manage interdependence through multiple levels of cooperation.	EU norms can be a comparative advantage if consistently applied. Multilateralism is the option of first resort (but not the only vector).
<b>Transatlantic Partnership</b>	Partnership is in a league of its own, but there is criticism of US unilateralism. Open to a deeper EU-US partnership, but not at the exclusion of others.	Partnership of existential value, to be deepened and expanded. EU playing a central role here but not necessarily covering the full spectrum of the partnership.	Uniquely important partnership, to be advanced where interests converge. EU a fully-fledged partner to the US, not a follower, with the EU partnering with others too.	Deepen the partnership, while reducing EU dependence on the US. A strong EU benefits the US and is the best hedge if US turns nationalistic and isolationist.
<b>Strategic autonomy</b>	Not a priority, but the EU needs adequate assets to carry more weight.	A misguided idea likely to do more harm than good and in any case unachievable.	Essential for the EU to be better equipped to pursue its priorities on its own when needed.	Europeans should build their sovereignty to choose their priorities and deliver.
<b>European defence policy</b>	Need stronger European military capabilities but NATO in charge of defending Europe.	EU-level cooperation may be useful but NATO foundational to European defence.	Europeans to take much more responsibility for their security through joint efforts.	Focus on joint efforts to strengthen European defence capabilities and industry.
<b>Regional vs global focus</b>	Crisis management and peace-building in the EU neighbourhood. Partnerships for effective multilateralism on global challenges and public goods.	Europeans to take more responsibility for security in their neighbourhood, and to enhance their engagement in the Indo-Pacific.	The EU to have its own position and say on major issues on regional and global agendas, while defining own terms of engagement with major powers.	An EU full-spectrum partner in its extended neighbourhood, that engages middle powers, can be a global co-shaping power.
<b>EU integration and enlargement</b>	Connects distinct EU normative features and what the EU does in the world. Supports deeper integration and enlargement, subject to thorough EU reforms.	EU cooperation is useful for strengthening the Western front in global competition, and EU enlargement is a geostrategic priority to push Russia back.	Joining EU forces and assets is essential to gain clout and defend EU interests. Support enlargement but, if EU reforms are blocked, consider differentiated integration.	No "power Europe" without a more integrated EU. Harness the EU as a growth multiplier and use enlargement to drive EU reform.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Giovanni Grevi is a Senior Fellow at the Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy (CSDS) of the Brussels School of Governance (BSoG-VUB), where he is teaching European foreign policy and international relations. Giovanni also teaches at the College of Europe, Bruges, and at Sciences Po, Paris, and is a Senior Associate Fellow with ISPI and the European Policy Centre (EPC). He has worked and published extensively on EU foreign and security policy, global order, US foreign policy, foresight and EU politics and institutions. Between 2016 and 2020, Giovanni was a Senior Fellow and Head of the Europe in the World programme at the EPC. Previously, he worked at the Foundation for International Relations and External Dialogue (FRIDE) as Senior Researcher and Director (2010-2015). Giovanni served as a Senior Research Fellow at the EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) from 2005 to 2010 and worked at the EPC as Policy Analyst and Associate Director of Studies (1999-2005).

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