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The EU and Global Order in Transition, i.e., Civilian Power in Power Politics and the Post-Peace World

Abstract

The research subject of this article is to examine the position and significance of the European Union within the rapidly-evolving international order, with a particular focus on the period from 2016 to 2024. The post-1989 international system is undergoing reconfiguration, marked by dominant trends such as bilateralism, power politics, protectionism (and related economic practices), the deceleration of globalisation in favour of regionalisation (so-called "slowbalisation"), and the growing assertiveness of states such as Russia and the People's Republic of China in international relations. In contrast, the EU represents the opposite of these trends – it is a normative and civilian power, rather than a hard power. The primary objective of this article is to address the following research questions: What are the defining characteristics of the international order at the threshold of the fourth decade of the 21st century? To what degree does the EU – as both a soft and civilian power – posses the necessary instruments to shape the emerging World 2.0 which is increasingly driven by power politics?

Keywords: EU Security and Defense Policy, International Order, Soft Power, Power Politics, EU Crises, Transatlantic Relations, NATO, United States (US), China, Trump, Economic Relations, Common Foreign and Security Policy, CFSP, Common Security and Defence Policy, CSDP, International Order

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Introduction – Initial and Research Assumptions

The contemporary international order is undergoing profound transformations across the political, economic, and social dimensions. The period from 2016 to 2024 – marked by Brexit, Donald Trump's first presidency, the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and Trump's re-election – has not only underscored but also intensified and, in some cases, accelerated pre-existing global challenges (it would be erroneous to suggest that these events originated the current global crises; rather, they exposed and exacerbated issues that had long been present but were either insufficiently recognised or disregarded by political decision-makers). At the threshold of the fourth decade of the 21st century, many fundamental questions remain unanswered. At the same time, the assertion that "nothing will ever be the same again" (often invoked in reference to the pandemic and the war in Ukraine) is as flawed as the characterisation of the current international order as that of a new Cold War (a comparison that oversimplifies the complexity of global dynamics). Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that the post-1989 international order is undergoing a process of profound reconfiguration. We are entering what can be described as a post-peace world. This term should be understood in two ways. Firstly, in a direct sense, it denotes the intensification of inter-state conflicts and wars, most notably exemplified by Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Secondly, in an indirect sense, it signifies a departure from the cooperative principles that have traditionally governed international relations – such as multilateralism, the rules of the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the principle of reciprocity which underpinned the European Union's (EU) development in the 1990s. These are increasingly being replaced by trends that run counter to these foundations, with power politics and protectionism taking precedence. The research problem of this article is therefore to characterise the EU's position in this dynamically changing international environment. It aims to address the following key questions: To which extent is the international order evolving, and what are its defining characteristics at the beginning of the fourth decade of the 21st century?; To what degree does the EU – as both a soft and civilian power – posses the necessary instruments to shape the emerging World 2.0 which is increasingly driven by power politics?; What are the most significant challenges confronting the EU as both a political and economic actor in international relations?

Based on the research questions, three research hypotheses have been formulated. Hypothesis no. 1: The international order is undergoing a significant transformation. Its dominant trends include bilateralism

and power politics, protectionism (and related practices), a deceleration of globalisation accompanied by an increasing emphasis on regionalisation (so-called "slowbalisation"), and the assertiveness of states such as Russia and China in international politics, and their efforts – together with some Global South countries – to form an anti-Western bloc.

Hypothesis no. 2: The European Union was established in the 1990s, a period characterised by globalisation, multilateralism, diplomacy, and the peaceful resolution of international disputes. It is a normative and civilian power rather than a hard power. Therefore, the current international environment does not favour the EU, as its position was built on principles that are now in contrast with ongoing global trends. Additionally, from an international perspective, the EU continues to be perceived as a political "dwarf" (due to the weakness of its security and foreign policy). At the same time, it is transforming from an economic "giant" into a less competitive economy when compared to the world's largest economies – lacking innovation and facing numerous unresolved structural problems. Furthermore, the EU is deeply divided internally and lacks unity, which is a fundamental prerequisite for effectively addressing global challenges.

Hypothesis no. 3. The primary responsibility of the EU is increasingly centred on responding to external challenges. These challenges, whether indirectly (such as the US-China conflict) or directly (such as US trade policy) will shape the EU's decisions regarding the future development of its foreign and security policy, as well as its economic strategy.

This article employs several research methods. The factorial method is used to examine the transformation of the global order over the past three decades, beginning in 1989, while also identifying the nature of the various crises the EU has faced in recent years. The systems method is applied to assess the characteristics of the international order and the EU as an actor in global affairs, exploring their interconnections and the implications for the EU's role on the global stage. Additionally, both quantitative and qualitative analyses, along with the comparative method, are employed to evaluate the key challenges shaping the EU's political and economic position in the world. The comparative method, in particular, is used to assess the EU's global standing by analysing specific indicators of its potential in international relations, especially in comparison to the United States and China.

1. The EU in International Relations – Methodological and Theoretical Framework

A characteristic feature – one that amplifies cognitive difficulties in conducting scientific research on the European Union and has implications for political practice – is the indeterminacy of its phenomenon. As a structure *in statu nascendi*, the EU remains in a constant state of evolution, representing an ongoing process rather than a fully-realised entity. An additional difficulty is that when analysing the European Union as an actor on the international stage – both from the perspective of scientific theory and political practice – we are dealing with a structure that is heterogeneous in institutional, legal, and functional terms. Therefore, it should be regarded as a distinct collective entity. It encompasses not only the EU as a supranational body but also its individual Member States, which simultaneously contribute to the Union's international activities while pursuing their own foreign policies. Consequently, the EU occupies a unique position in international relations – one that does not align neatly with the traditional categories of either a sovereign state or a classical international organisation.

Given these considerations, Aron's concept of a "political unit" appears to be a more suitable framework for analysing the EU's international status. This concept refers to a territorially organised political unit, encompassing not only states but also complex structures such as the European Union. While the EU remains a unique political unit, its characteristics allow for the application of similar analytical tools used in the study of states. This approach is particularly useful when examining the EU's external relations, which consist of two primary components: economic relations with foreign partners (the community method); and foreign and security policy (the intergovernmental method) (Barcz, 2012, pp. 129–144).

Given the diversity of international relations and European integration theories, selecting an appropriate theoretical framework to explain the EU's role in global affairs requires a multidimensional approach. Relying exclusively on a single theory while disregarding others risks limiting the scope of analysis and overlooking valuable insights. Therefore, three fundamental theoretical perspectives should be considered: realism; liberalism; and constructivism, each of which captures the essence and nature of the EU phenomenon. From the perspective of the realist school of international relations, Jacek Czaputowicz aptly observes that "EU foreign policy today is *Realpolitik* rather than *Idealpolitik*, in which moral values give way to interests" (Czaputowicz, 2015, p. 93). He further argues that the EU's external relations "are better explained by realist theories,

which perceive international relations through the lens of nation-states and take into account the influence of power" (Czaputowicz, 2015, p. 93). The realist perspective centres its analysis on state power, national interests, and systemic conditions. From this viewpoint, the EU's external relations are seen as a product of the interests of individual Member States, which "choose to engage in joint activities in pursuit of their own goals" (Rosiński, 2014, p. 252) – goals typically linked to security, prestige, and economic benefits (paraphrasing the argument of the French scholar Catherine Gegout). At the same time, the principles of liberalism (particularly the promotion of political and economic liberal values) shape the actions of Western states, including the EU, in their relations with third countries (Haliżak, 2016, p. 41). Liberalism serves as the primary theoretical framework for understanding the EU's international engagement. As a rationalist theory, it assumes that governments operate according to the logic of "consequences", making decisions based on cost-benefit calculations and the pursuit of interest maximisation (Pohl, van Willigen, van Vonno, 2016, pp. 65, 68). Liberalism also provides a strong explanatory foundation for the concept of civilian power, one of the EU's key international strategies, alongside the idea of normative power. Together, these two concepts fall under the broader and more inclusive category of soft power, which characterises the EU. However, in contrast to the arguments of dogmatic proponents of the civilian power theory, I align with scholars such as Greek researcher Stelios Stavridis in rejecting the notion that the development of the EU's military dimension (e.g., through EU-led military operations) is tantamount to the EU renouncing its role as a civilian power in international relations (Zajączkowski, 2019; Zajączkowski, 2021, pp. 7–35).

2. The Evolution of the International Order

The international order that emerged post-1989 has undergone profound transformations, particularly in recent years. When viewed from a perspective of over 35 years, and with a necessary degree of simplification, several distinct stages in its evolution can be identified.

1989–2008 is the period of Western domination, underpinned by the principles of the Washington Consensus which emphasised free markets, economic liberalism, and the promotion of liberal democracy (as symbolised by Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History*). The immediate post-1989 years were characterised by what has been termed a "unipolar moment", during which the United States exercised unparalleled supremacy across multiple domains. A defining demonstration of this

dominance was the US military's success in the First Gulf War against Saddam Hussein. Simultaneously, the years 1989–2008 constituted a distinct phase of what can be described as "the trilateralism order" composed of three interlocking puzzles – namely, the EU, the US, and China. This order replaced the previouseconomic configuration of the EU, the US, and Japan. These three actors derived significant benefits from globalisation, particularly in economic terms. During this period, a distinctive model of economic cooperation emerged; Western economies – primarily those of the United States and Europe – relocated industrial production to China, while China pursued an export-driven growth strategy, with Western markets as its primary destination.

2008–2009 was the period of the global economic crisis and the beginning of the decline of the West's absolute dominance. Although commonly described as a global crisis, its most severe impact was concentrated in Western economies. The crisis not only undermined the dominance of neoliberal economic policies but also accelerated the rise of so-called "emerging markets", particularly China and India. The 2008 crisis exposed structural vulnerabilities within Western economies, while many developing countries demonstrated greater resilience to economic shocks. During this period, emerging markets exhibited growth rates more than twice those of Western economies, alongside an increasingly significant role in global trade and foreign direct investment (FDI) (The World Investment Report 2013, p. 216).[1] At the same time, since the second decade of the 21st century, there has also been a visible decline in the West's share in the foreign trade in favour of emerging countries/ markets of the Global South (The Economic Development in Africa Report, 2010).

Russia's aggression against eastern Ukraine in 2014 and its illegal annexation of Crimea represented a critical turning point in the post-Cold War international order. This event was particularly significant since Moscow "flagrantly violated the fundamental legal and diplomatic principles governing European international relations" (Kuźniar, 2022, p. 103). At the same time, this aggression undermined the existing model of international cooperation, which was largely based on the primacy of the economic factor, commonly referred to as the geo-economic paradigm. Broadly speaking, this paradigm suggested that economic and technological influence would replace traditional military power. At the height of neoliberalism (in the 1990s and the beginning of the 21st century), as Edward Haliżak aptly

[1] In 2012, and for the first time in history, developing countries attracted more foreign investment than developed economies, with USD 702.8 billion and USD 560.7 billion respectively.

notes, "a considerable number of authors at that time went so far as to claim that military power had lost its relevance in foreign policy and that national strategies should instead prioritise economic growth and global competitiveness" (Haliżak, 2011, p. 22). While this perspective may appear outdated in retrospect, it remained highly influential until the mid-2010s, particularly within the European Union and its Member States. Focusing on the development of the common market, EU countries systematically reduced their defence expenditures until the early 21st century.

In the years 2016–2021, the international order entered a phase of increasing instability and deepening divisions. This turbulence was driven by several interrelated factors: "Russia's confrontational policy towards the West, instability and conflict (stemmed from the unintended consequences of the Arab Spring and flawed Western interventions – from the author) spanning from Libya to Afghanistan (often described as the West's "soft underbelly") and China's assertive pursuit of great-power status, including in strategic and military domains" (Kuźniar, 2022, p. 208). The West's naivety (and a weakness in its strategic thinking) was rooted in its assumptions (more a product of wishful thinking) that had remained prevalent two decades earlier – namely, the expectation that Russia would undergo a process of Europeanisation and the belief that China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) on 11 December 2001, would set it on a path toward Westernisation, leading to both political and economic transformation. The reality, however, unfolded in a starkly different manner. China, capitalising on the opportunities afforded by the West, was creating and shaping the world on their own terms, and experienced an almost tenfold increase in exports within 15 years of joining the WTO. Simultaneously, China expanded its dominance within the United Nations system originally established by the West after World War II (the World Health Organization serves as a prime example of this, particularly in its controversial role in handling the Chinese authorities' concealment of information during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic). Kishore Mahbubani had already drawn attention to this negative phenomenon back in 2013 (Mahbubani, 2013). Meanwhile, Russia pursued an increasingly aggressive approach toward the West, exemplified by credible reports from 3 US intelligence agencies (the FBI, CIA, and NSA) documenting Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election. Similarly, British intelligence agencies highlighted Russian involvement in the Brexit referendum. Such actions illustrate a broader pattern of Russian interference (through disinformation) in Western political processes, a strategy that persists to this day.

Although the liberal international order had already been weakened by the West's own miscalculations – both in the socio-economic sphere, i.e., the 2008 crisis and, more broadly, the phenomenon of neoliberal blindness, as well as in the political domain (unjustified military interventions) – Donald Trump's first term of office further undermined the ideas and principles of the liberal international order. The crisis of the liberal international order was further evidenced by the global rise in populist tendencies, including the growing popularity of various populist movements and parties. This process has been unfolding and continues to this day under the banner of an anti-liberal counterrevolution, manifesting as a global phenomenon (e.g., in the Philippines and Brazil). At the same time, the years 2016–2021 marked the decline of the aforementioned neoliberal trilateralism, as it ceased to function in its previous form. A key exemplification of this shift was Trump's tariff war with China, launched in 2018 (a rivalry that will be subsequently discussed in this article).

The aforementioned period served, in many ways, as a prelude to a new phase in international relations. The previous era was drawing to a close, marking what some have termed "the end of the age of innocence". The pandemic amplified existing phenomena that had dominated international relations since 2016, such as: resurgence of the nation-state as the primary actor; the devaluation of globalisation alongside the revival of mercantilist policies; the rise of nationalist populism and authoritarian politics; an intensified focus on national security; and a growing rivalry among the great powers. These trends were further reinforced by the internal vulnerabilities of the West (the election of Donald Trump exposed deep societal and political polarisation in the United States, while the European Union and its Member States grappled with a series of internal crises – an issue that will be explored in greater detail later in this article).

The war in Ukraine that broke out in 2022 is not merely a local conflict (despite Putin's attempt to frame it as such). Its ramifications extend well beyond the region, carrying profound global consequences. One of the clearest indicators of this broader impact is the involvement of North Korean soldiers fighting on Russia's side. The trajectory and eventual resolution of the conflict (or, more plausibly, its prolonged stalemate) will play a decisive role in shaping the future of international relations. Giovanni Grevi aptly notes that "implications of Russia's aggression will unfold over many years and affect the shape of the international order" (Grevi, 2023a).

In its February 2023 report, the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS), under the telling title of *Terra Incognita*: *Exploring the long-term implications of the war in Ukraine* rightly points out "three ways

in which Russia's aggression affects long-term change (in international relations – from the author), namely, as a big multiplier of earlier trends, a big disruption introducing major discontinuities and a big diversion that distracts from cooperation on shared global challenges" (Grevi, 2023a, p. 2). The war in Ukraine is also another stage in the transformation of the international order, a process that has been observable over the past 15 years and which started in 2008. Akin to the pandemic, it amplifies existing phenomena and processes. Serena Giusti aptly states: "The war in Ukraine has accelerated processes that were already in place" (Giusti, 2022, p. 13). It underscored the importance of geopolitics as a key dimension shaping international relations (Korniychuk, 2023, p. 7). According to Andriy Korniychuk, the geopolitical paradigm, "which is driving competition on the international stage, potentially leading to further instability, arms races and conflicts" (Grevi, 2023a, p. 2). In his view, this, in turn, leads to "the process of the securitisation of international affairs and domestic politics" (Korniychuk, 2023, p. 19).[2]

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine has reinforced a stark geopolitical divide between the West, which upholds democratic principles, and the non-West, led by Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea – often referred to as the so-called "Quartet of Chaos". Notably, just days before Russia's invasion, on 4 February 2022, a joint Sino-Russian revisionist manifesto was published, calling for a new world order. In this context, the war in Ukraine has also had profound implications for the West's relations with the Global South. Many countries in that bloc have maintained a neutral stance or, albeit discreetly, have leaned toward supporting Russia's position. This approach reflects "deeper shifts in international relations " (a trend that has been evolving for some time as ties between the Global South and Russia or China have strengthened), particularly evident "in terms of narratives and values," serving as a "manifestation of this pattern of change" (Grevi, 2023b, p. 112). At the same time, Moscow and Beijing – just as they did during the pandemic (through so-called "mask diplomacy" and "vaccine diplomacy") – have been actively promoting an anti-Western narrative in the Global South. They portray the West, including NATO, as the primary instigators of the conflict in Ukraine in 2022, accusing Western countries of provoking Russia through NATO's eastward expansion.

The world of 2024 and the coming years remains marked by geopolitical turbulence. The already cited FEPS report and its conclusions on the

[2] This process involves "the extension of the number of policy areas being framed through security categories and narratives that call for, and legitimise, extraordinary measures to protect against threats and challenges" (Korniychuk, 2023, p. 19).

evolving international order even state that "what lies ahead is terra incognita – a strategic landscape that eludes ready historical analogies" (Grevi, 2023a, p. 2). However, it seems that we are not entering a completely unknown "terra incognita". Instead, three key directions of change can be identified that will, to some extent, shape the evolution of the international order. The world is currently: a) in a period between slowbalisation and splintering globalisation, b) under the weight of great power rivalry and a return to power politics, and c) in the twilight of the liberal international order.

Regarding point a), we are witnessing processes that are hindering the previous pace of globalisation. One researcher notes that "globalisation is at high risk of splintering" (Grevi, 2023b, p. 109) while others speak of de-globalisation. However, both terms fall short of fully encapsulating the complexity of the current global reality. The world is experiencing a process of fragmentation, driven by several key factors, including the economic decoupling between Western economies – particularly the United States – and China, as well as its milder form, derisking. Additionally, the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as severely disrupted or restricted supply chains, efforts to reindustrialize Western economies, and the increasing use of protectionist measures as instruments of foreign policy, have further reinforced these trends. *The Economist* provided a comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon (fragmentation) in one of its spring 2024 issues (The Economist, 2024c). Nevertheless, this shift does not signify the end of globalisation (i.e. de-globalisation); indeed, it will persist – albeit in a weakened and altered form. For now, it takes the shape of *slowbalisation*. This phenomenon will continue to be reinforced by Trump's trade policies (such as the imposition of tariffs on selected goods and products), the intensifying economic rivalry between the West and China (now encompassing not only the United States but also the European Union), and China's own policy.

Regarding point b), in recent years, particularly in the wake of the war in Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic, and now Trump's second presidential term, international relations have been increasingly characterised by a phenomenon of what can be termed "trust drain" between states and global partners (Grevi, 2023b, p. 116). At the same time, there is also "geopolitics trumping economics and multilateralism" (Grevi, 2023b, p. 125). Two weeks after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in March 2022, Fareed Zakaria explicitly stated that the conflict was "marked by the triumph of politics over economics" (Zakaria, 2022). The most pronounced structural manifestation of this trend (i.e., so-called "power" politics) is the systemic rivalry between the United States and China, a dynamic that is expected

to shape both international politics and economies in the years to come. Furthermore, a prolonged confrontation is likely to persist between the Quartet of Chaos and its allies on one side and the West on the other. From the perspective of Putin and his strategic partners, a multipolar order, or, more accurately, a state of international disorder where power politics prevails over multilateral cooperation, constitutes the primary objective of their foreign policies.

Regarding point c) we are witnessing the twilight of the liberal international order, a process extensively analysed by Roman Kuźniar in his works. Echoing this perspective, Korniychuk asserts that "the multilateral order is unlikely to persist in its current form in most scenarios" (Korniychuk, 2023, p. 18). A striking and deeply concerning example of this crisis was Russia's presidency of the UN Security Council in the spring of 2022 – mere weeks after its invasion of Ukraine, an outright violation of the fundamental standards and principles of the liberal order and international law. Moving forward, Russia and its allies – the so-called "Quartet of Chaos" – are likely to deepen their cooperation even further. Meanwhile, cooperation within the Western bloc is entering a phase of uncertainty, largely due to Donald Trump's return to the presidency. His views on the liberal international order remain unchanged from his first term (2017–2021). The question is not whether his policies will weaken Western unity, but to what extent they will exacerbate existing divisions in an already volatile global landscape. The early months of 2025 – particularly February – have already provided a stark illustration of this risk. A sequence of destabilising events, beginning with a Trump-Putin phone call and followed by direct talks between their administrations, inflammatory remarks against the EU by Vice President J.D. Vance at the Munich Conference, and Trump's controversial comments about President Volodymyr Zelensky – including a highly publicised argument between the two in the Oval Office with Vance present – demonstrates the disruptive impact of Trump's approach. His rhetoric and actions actively undermine Western cohesion at a critical juncture in global affairs.

In summary, the era of relative peace and prosperity, as Grevi observes, is moving toward a "spiral of systematic regression" (Grevi, 2023a, p. 5), with the trends outlined in points a, b, and c reinforcing this trajectory. Similarly, Zakaria echoes this sentiment, suggesting that "we may be seeing the reversal of 30 years of globalisation" (Zakaria, 2022). Nevertheless, it is crucial to underscore that multilateralism and the core principles of the liberal international order will not vanish entirely. As Korniychuk argues, "the complete unravelling of multilateralism does not seem the most plausible scenario, because such an outcome would send destructive

shockwaves through advanced and developing countries alike, as well as all the major powers (…)" (Korniychuk, 2023, pp. 18–19).

To provide a more comprehensive perspective on the evolving international order, it is essential to consider not only the three primary directions of change but also three key patterns identified by Kuźniar. Firstly, in the context of the US-China rivalry, Kuźniar emphasises that "unlike similar situations in the past, it is not an existential confrontation" (Kuźniar, 2022, p. 300). He argues that "the stakes of a military confrontation between them are too high for either side to seriously consider it" (Kuźniar, 2022, p. 301). Secondly, despite the erosion of the liberal international order, "no one is calling for the dissolution of the UN or other universal or (sub-)regional organisations" (Kuźniar, 2022, p. 302). Finally, Kuźniar notes that "there is no new grand ideology on the horizon that offers an attractive vision for human development (in the way that liberalism did in Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History*)" (Kuźniar, 2022, p. 302).

Considering the aforementioned premises and conditions shaping the current and future international order, the most fitting descriptors are those proposed by Grevi and Kuźniar. Respectively, they characterise this evolving landscape as that of multipolar bricolageand multipolar power politics.

Grevi anticipates the emergence of "some form of bifurcated multipolarity. In other words, it will become an order where various powers hold sufficient confidence and resources to pursue their own interests with a degree of autonomy, but where the rivalry between the US and China exerts a growing pull factor on most of them" (Grevi, 2023b, p. 113). Similarly, Kuźniar characterises multipolar power politics as "a polycentric order, meaning a rather decentralised one (...)" (Kuźniar, 2024a, p. 11). He further argues that "the overlap of multipolar power politics with the growing polycentrism in the global structure will temporarily result in greater instability and conflict potential in international relations" (Kuźniar, 2024b, p. 25). At the same time, as Sven Biscop points out, the dynamics currently unfolding in international relations are far from unprecedented. He observes that "three thousand years of international politics is a history of powers alternately competing and cooperating (…). All too often, powers chose the path of rivalry and, ultimately, war to still their ambition (…)". According to Biscop, the war in Ukraine, internal divisions within the EU, and Trump's disruptive policies are not indicators of a "new world order – this is the «old normal» that forces itself upon Europe's attention again (…)" (Biscop, 2025).

3. Non-Post-Crisis Europe. Toward a Paradigm Shift – Security Above All

The European Union must maintain internal cohesion to effectively address the challenges of a shifting international order. However, this cohesion is increasingly lacking. The EU now finds itself at a critical juncture. In this context, the metaphor of being "at a crossroads" signifies uncertainty regarding the Union's future trajectory, as the current model of EU integration has reached its limits. It also underscores the necessity of making decisive choices about the direction of future reforms. To understand the reasons behind this situation, it is essential to acknowledge the growing divergence between a shared European identity and national allegiances. The rise of nationalist and xenophobic sentiments, coupled with the spread of populism, threatens the foundational principles of the European project. More broadly, liberalism as an ideological framework is in crisis (and not only within the EU, as demonstrated in the previous chapter). At the same time, the traditional left has struggled to provide viable solutions to these challenges. As scepticism towards liberal ideals intensifies, societal divisions continue to deepen.

3.1. EU Crises

These processes have intensified due to a series of successive and overlapping crises within the European Union. Each crisis has served as a turning point in the evolution of the integration process. Between 2005 and 2016, several key crises can be identified:

- a constitutional crisis – the end of a "federal Europe";
- the eurozone crisis – one which exposed fundamental systemic issues within the eurozone and revealed its structural weaknesses;[3]
- the 2015 migration crisis exacerbated fears and resistance towards foreigners, a sentiment further intensified by a wave of terrorist attacks across EU Member States during this period;
- Brexit – the culmination of these crises, which ultimately exposed the vulnerabilities of the European integration process.

Each of these crises has further deepened the EU's struggles with identity, (axiological) values, and leadership, while also eroding confidence in the

[3] It is also essential to consider the unique structure of the eurozone. Its defining feature is the centralisation of monetary policy at the EU level, while fiscal policies remain decentralised within individual Member States. Consequently, the EU lacks the necessary financial instruments to both implement structural economic reforms within the eurozone and effectively respond to asymmetric shocks affecting specific Member States.

European integration project. Moreover, these crises remain unresolved, and their long-term consequences will continue to shape the Union for years to come. A key example is the incomplete reform of the eurozone and the failure to fully implement Europe's banking union. Likewise, the migration issue remains a persistent challenge, resurfacing repeatedly and now being exploited by Russia and Belarus as part of their hybrid warfare against the West (cf. the migration crisis at Poland's eastern border, which also serves as the EU's external frontier).

Referring to the title of Professor Grosse's book *Post-Crisis Europe*, it is necessary to acknowledge – just as the author himself does – that this term is not entirely precise. This choice, which is both deliberate and arguably provocative, reflects the complexity of the current situation. As Grosse states, "It would be more accurate to describe this moment as a transitional period between the most severe crises in the history of European integration and a phase of very slow normalisation, accompanied by attempts to overcome problems and discuss reforms within the EU" (Grosse, 2018, p. 8).

The pandemic and the full-scale war, i.e., the years from 2020 to 2024, have reinforced many of the fears that emerged – or, more precisely, were triggered – by the EU crises of 2005–2016. This has been especially evident in EU citizens' concerns about economic survival and social stability. The pandemic exposed (or served as a stark reminder of) the fragility of open borders, as Schengen rules were temporarily suspended. It also highlighted national self-interest and the shortages of essential hygiene and medical supplies. Meanwhile, the war instilled a deep sense of insecurity among EU citizens regarding the most fundamental issue – human life itself. "The war has shaken Europeans out of the complacency" and "has shattered Europe's comfort zone" (Grevi, 2022, p. 99).

3.2. Leadership Crisis in the EU 2.0. and the Decline of Faith in European Integration – the Rise of Populists

As the European Union enters 2025, it does so under the weight of a severe political and economic crisis in its two largest and most influential Member States, namely – France[4] and Germany.[5] This situation not only highlights a leadership crisis within the EU but also signals a broader decline in confidence in European integration – one that extends beyond

[4] France ended 2024 with early parliamentary elections and four different governments.

[5] Germany saw its Bundestag pass a vote of no confidence against Chancellor Olaf Scholz in mid-December 2024, leading to early elections held on 23.02.2025.

France and Germany and to the Union as a whole. Moreover, five other EU Member States – Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Romania, and Ireland – are experiencing significant political crises. Some are struggling to form new governments, while others are grappling with extreme instability.

Leadership crises in the EU (what some call a "leaderless world") along with uncertainties regarding the overall vision and purpose of European integration, have been an inherent feature of the Union's landscape for over 15 years. The lack of tangible results in addressing these crises has fuelled growing distrust among EU citizens toward Brussels and, in some cases, has even led to confrontational attitudes. This climate has contributed to a resurgence of nationalist sentiment, reflected in a renewed emphasis on the nation-state as the primary framework for addressing domestic challenges (a tendency particularly evident during the early phase of the pandemic crisis). Extreme political movements have become the most vocal proponents of this shift, spanning both ends of the spectrum in the forms of right-wing groups such as the AfD, which emerged during the eurozone crisis, and left-wing factions such as Mélenchon's movement. 2014's European parliamentary elections marked a turning point, as those extremist parties – particularly those on the right – secured over 100 seats for the first time. Since then, their influence has steadily grown in the subsequent elections of 2019 and 2024, and they now form three factions within the European Parliament. Their primary objective is to dismantle the EU in its current form, though significant ideological differences exist among them. Their focus remains on protecting national interests, rather than "expanding political influence or fostering a shared European identity" (Osica, 2010, p. 86). In such a Europe, there is little room for global ambitions.

Moreover, these crises within the EU coincided with a period of weak leadership, one that lacks both vision, and, "in several key eurozone countries, led by figures who are, to put it euphemistically, not serious enough for the challenges at hand" (*Rocznik Strategiczny 2011/2012*, 2012, p. 57). This weakness was perhaps most vividly illustrated by a 2011 caricature published in *The Economist*, which depicted four prominent European leaders of the time – Sarkozy, Berlusconi, Merkel, and Zapatero – each portrayed with physical impairments symbolising their ineffective governance (The Economist, 2011). Although these particular figures have since left office (or, in some cases, passed away), their successors have not necessarily improved this perception. Indeed, at times, they have even reinforced it. The absence of strong leadership, combined with waning confidence in the European project, continues to shape the EU's position and influence on the global stage.

3.3. Changing the EU Paradigm(s)

In summary, the European Union remains in a state of perpetual crisis. On the one hand, in line with the established logic of EU decision-making, these crises have often compelled Member States to mobilise and make difficult choices. On the other hand, as previously noted, these crises have never been fully resolved, resulting in a prolonged weakening of the EU.

Considering both internal dynamics (as outlined in this chapter) and external influences (as discussed in chapter II), we can observe a gradual shift in the foundational paradigm of the European Union. Freedom has increasingly been supplanted by security, understood in both a narrow and a broader sense. In the first instance, the EU's security – historically anchored in transatlantic relations and the post-1989 international order – is now increasingly uncertain. This has compelled the EU to pursue greater strategic autonomy, though not necessarily to the extent of developing a fully independent Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) separate from the United States (a topic that will be examined in the next chapter). Simultaneously, economic and social challenges – both external and internal (e.g., uncontrolled migration, the erosion of the free market due to protectionist measures within the EU and globally) – are driving the Union to prioritise economic security in an increasingly unstable world (the implications of potential trade conflicts with the US and China will be explored in the next chapter).

There is, therefore, a pressing need to accurately identify problems and challenges, distinguishing their root causes from their consequences. One attempt to redefine the EU's international policy can be seen in the 2016 European Security Strategy (ESS) (which marks a significant departure from its 2003 predecessor) and the 2022 Strategic Compass. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy explicitly acknowledges in its introduction that the world of the second decade of the 21st century is in a state of permanent crisis. The authors of the ESS clearly stated several years ago that "in today's unstable world, soft power is not enough: we need to strengthen our credibility in the field of security and defence" (*A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*, 2016, p. 42). As we moved into 2024 and beyond, the global landscape had become even more unstable and unpredictable.

4. Still a Political Dwarf, and (No Longer) an Economic Giant in the World 2.0

4.1. The Political Dimension

4.1.1. Key Weaknesses in the EU's Security Policy

Christopher Hill, Julian Lindley-French, and Roy H. Ginsberg identified more than two to three decades ago a growing gap between expectations of the EU's role and position in international relations and its actual performance in security and foreign policy (Hill, 1993, p. 21; Ginsberg, 1999, pp. 429–454; Lindley-French, p. 56). This gap has continued to widen systematically, remaining evident at least until the end of 2024.

The war in Ukraine provided the clearest evidence of this reality. In one of my recent articles, I confirmed the hypothesis put forward in that study, which argued that the war in Ukraine was not a "turning point" (as described by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen) or, in Giovanni Grevi's terms, a "quantum leap" in EU security policy (Zajączkowski, 2024, pp. 7–8). The fact that the EU undertook joint security and defence initiatives, imposed sanctions on Russia, and aligned Member States' positions on the threats posed by Russia's neo-imperial policies did not signify deep structural changes or a fundamental transformation of the nature of the CSDP. The core structural and systemic weaknesses of the CSDP remained unaddressed, and the war in Ukraine merely further exposed them. It demonstrated "enduring systemic challenges facing the EU defence agenda" (Magri, 2022, p. 11).

In my aforementioned article (Zajączkowski, 2024, pp. 26–32), I identified several systemic challenges in the development of the CSDP.

- Strategic cacophony: the absence of a shared strategic culture among Member States results in inconsistencies in defence policies and approaches.
- Since 2016, numerous initiatives have been introduced to reform the CSDP. However, as Daniel Fiott aptly observes, "the reality today is that the "alphabet soup" of EU security and defence – CSDP, PESCO, EDF, CARD, CDP, MPCC, NIPs, EPF, etc. – has not yet led to any tangible shift in the Union's capability base or readiness for deployment" (Fiott, 2020, p. 3).
- The war in Ukraine highlights "the never-ending problem of military capabilities" (Coticchia, 2022, p. 32). There areextant gaps in European military capabilities and a lack of interoperability. These gaps extend from available tanks and troop transport vehicles to advanced military technology.

- The European defence industry and market remains fragmented, "where states implement procurement policies largely unilaterally, and firms compete unevenly due to barriers and restrictions to free competition" (Locatelli, 2022, p. 36).
- Since 2022, defence budgets across the EU have been increasing, yet the key challenge lies not in the amount of money spent, but in its effective allocation and utilisation. As the saying goes, more money does not necessarily mean better spending.

In summary, the EU remains a political dwarf in the realm of foreign and security policy. However, amid the rapid shifts in the international order, there is now broad political consensus (will) among Member States as regards the need to develop and strengthen this dimension of European integration. A particularly significant impetus for reinforcing the CSDP came from the events of early 2025, often referred to as the "Trump 2.0 effect" and the "Munich effect". These developments not only undermined trust within the transatlantic alliance but also exposed divergences in threat perceptions and values between the US and the EU. As a result, they acted as a catalyst for more decisive action as regards the CSDP, including the landmark decision to arm the EU. Referring to my previously mentioned article and the hypothesis presented therein, I argue that this sequence of events from the first weeks of 2025 – shaped by Trump's policies and his administration's stance toward Ukraine and the EU – constituted a more significant turning point for the CSDP than even Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine. History demonstrates that a series of smaller yet interconnected events can sometimes trigger a greater shock among decision-makers than a single large-scale crisis. At the same time, the evolution (rather than revolution) of the CSDP will remain closely tied to NATO and, for the foreseeable future, to the United States, despite growing challenges in transatlantic relations.

4.1.2. Transatlantic Relations – a Difficult, Even Cold, Partnership

The development of the EU's defence component should be analysed not only within the framework of internal EU dynamics but also in the broader context of transatlantic relations and NATO. These external factors have played – and continue to play – a crucial role in shaping the trajectory of political and defence integration within the EU.

When examining the process of political and defence integration within the EU – manifested through the Common Security and Defence Policy – it is crucial to recognise its fundamental premise. The CSDP

is not intended as an alternative to NATO, but rather as a mechanism to enhance the EU's international engagement. It functions primarily as an instrument for implementing the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) rather than as a system of collective defence. Importantly, the CSDP does not encompass territorial defence, which remains the responsibility of NATO. This interpretation is consistently reinforced in all relevant EU documents, from the conclusions of the Cologne and Helsinki summits in 1999 (which laid the foundation for the CSDP) to subsequent EU treaties. Each of these documents reaffirms that NATO remains the cornerstone of collective defence for its members and that it will continue to play a central role in crisis management. Furthermore, they explicitly state that the development of the EU's defence policy will proceed without undermining commitments under Article 5 of the Washington Treaty.

The process of the Europeanisation of Europe's defence can be broadly (and simply) categorised into two main approaches. The first approach emphasises the primacy of NATO (and the United States) and focuses on institutional initiatives while seeking the most suitable framework for Europe's identity (or autonomy) within NATO. The second approach advocates for deeper European military cooperation, emphasising the creation of a European Defence and Security Union, aiming to achieve greater political independence from the United States.

The war in Ukraine has unequivocally reaffirmed NATO's central role in collective defence. At the same time, "the war has also brought to the fore the deep problems affecting the security and defence systems of European states (...) (as I mentioned above) and unable to summon enough military power to promptly defend themselves without US support" (Fasola, Lucarelli, 2022, p. 64). Russia's aggression against Ukraine (...) in 2022 also starkly "verified the aspirations of some European Union Member States, especially France (...), to establish the strategic autonomy of the Union understood as an attempt to strengthen the EU's international standing relative to NATO" (Węc, 2022, p. 224).

Considering the aforementioned assumptions regarding the development of political and defence integration within the EU, as well as the implications of the war in Ukraine (which underscored both the EU's weaknesses and the simultaneous strength of NATO and the United States), alongside the return of Donald Trump for a second term as US President, it is essential to identify key patterns that will shape and influence transatlantic relations and the future trajectory of the CSDP.

Firstly, despite various declarations made by President Trump and differing analyses from experts, a US withdrawal from Euro-Atlantic

structures appears unlikely. NATO remains a cornerstone of American strategic interests in this part of the world, serving as a key security guarantee. Furthermore, the new Trump administration (whether through the Secretary of Defence or the Vice President) continues to reaffirm NATO's significance for the United States (Kielak, 2025).

Secondly, while the US is likely to remain in NATO, this does not preclude a potential reconfiguration of the alliance. This reconfiguration will involve, on the one hand, a reduction in the US role and a more selective approach to its commitments within the alliance. On the other hand, it will necessitate that the remaining NATO members, particularly the European pillar, assume greater responsibility within the organisation.

Thirdly, the new US administration's calls for a more balanced distribution of financial and military responsibilities within NATO should be analysed from three perspectives. Domestically, Trump has pledged to reduce US international commitments, including financial contributions. The increased defence spending by NATO members will be framed – much like during his first term – as a personal achievement, reinforcing his narrative of prioritising American taxpayers' interests. From the defence industry perspective, the US will aim to channel these increased military expenditures toward American arms manufacturers, ensuring that European NATO members invest in US military equipment. As previously noted, EU countries currently lack a sufficiently developed defence-industrial base, a gap that will take several years to address. Consequently, as European nations increase their military expenditures, a portion of these funds (whether voluntarily or not) will inevitably flow to the United States. This dynamic could also serve as a significant bargaining factor in the EU's negotiations with Donald Trump. Ultimately, the US demands for a redefinition of its role within NATO, particularly regarding European security, stem from broader geopolitical considerations – most notably, the strategic rivalry between the United States and China.

Fourthly, the increased US engagement in Europe during the Biden administration, particularly in response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine, did not signify a fundamental shift in American foreign policy priorities. Regardless of whomever holds the presidency, the primary focus of US strategy remains on Asia (the Indo-Pacific region) and the challenges posed by China's rising power. This was reaffirmed by the new Trump administration, both in official statements and by the president himself following his inauguration on 20th January 2025.

Finally, the US's pivot to Asia, which is an ongoing trend in American foreign policy, "does not mean that Washington will neglect other important theatres" (Grevi, 2022, p. 106). However, the US will expect its

allies, particularly the EU, to assume greater military responsibilities in Europe, a stance explicitly articulated by the Trump administration. For the EU, this necessitates further development of its CSDP within NATO's European pillar. Achieving this will require substantial increases in defence spending, an enhancement of military capabilities, a strengthening of Europe's defence industry, and improved interoperability among EU forces. These measures will not only reinforce the EU's role in the political-military sphere but also enhance its credibility as a security partner for the US – not only under the Trump administration. This aspect is particularly crucial, given that the US position on European security is likely to remain ambivalent, regardless of the next presidency. As Niklas Helwig and Ville Sinkkonen note, "the US's approach to Europe will, in the future, most likely oscillate between «primacist» tendencies driving for sustained US leadership, especially in defence matters, and a «benign neglect» of Europe in an age marked by strategic competition with China" (Helwig, Sinkkonen, 2022, p. 16).

4.2. The Economic Dimension

4.2.1. The EU's Main Economic Weaknesses

The European Union possesses substantial economic potential, rivalled only by that of the United States. However, it continues to grapple with numerous economic challenges. The title of an article published on one online platform, "The US Has Pulled Ahead of Europe" (Pietrow, 2024) is particularly telling. *The Economist* also highlights the dominance of the American economy (particularly in comparison to its G7 counterparts) within the global economic landscape. This analysis is presented in a special report under the aptly chosen title, "The Envy of the World" (The Economist, 2024e). The authors of this report draw attention to the fact that "over the past three decades America has left the rest of the rich world in the dust" (The Economist, 2024e, p. 9). They substantiate this claim with data, noting that: "In 1990 the US accounted for about two-fifths of the GDP of the G7. Today it makes up half. Output per person is now about 30% higher than in western Europe and Canada, and 60% higher than in Japan – gaps that have roughly doubled since 1990 (…)" (The Economist, 2024b, p. 9). At the same time, despite facing economic repercussions from the pandemic and persistent challenges (e.g., in the real estate market), China continues to achieve remarkable progress in specific sectors, particularly in the energy transition. For example, China has emerged as the world's largest exporter of electric vehicles (EVs), shipping one million units in 2024. Moreover, it holds a dominant position

in the production of solar panels and lithium-ion cells for EVs (Crossley, 2024). As Mario Draghi aptly states in the introduction to a report under his editorial supervision – "The foundations on which we built (the European economy – from the author) are now uncertain (...). It seems that the era of rapid global trade growth has passed, and EU companies face both greater competition from abroad and reduced access to foreign markets" (Kielak, 2024).

Among the numerous indicators that reflect the current position of the EU in the global economy (albeit in a limited and abbreviated form) one particularly striking fact stands out: only four of the world's fifty largest technology companies are European. A compelling example is provided by *The Economist* – "In 2005, America's biggest issuers of patents were Procter & Gamble, 3M, General Electric, DuPont, and Qualcomm, while in the Euro area they were Siemens, Bosch, Ericsson, Philips, and BASF. In America in 2023, there were four new entrants in its top five: Microsoft, Apple, Google, and IBM joined Qualcomm. In the Euro area it was almost all the same, with only Bayer displacing Siemens" (The Economist, 2024b). Over the past 15 years, the European Union has experienced a significant decline in its manufacturing sector, with 2.3 million jobs lost and further reductions anticipated.[6] At the turn of the 21st century, EU Member States accounted for approximately 20% of global industrial output. However, by 2021, this share had declined to just 14.5%, with Europe losing ground to both Asia and the United States (Kowalczyk, 2024). In the Draghi report, the term "energy" appears no fewer than 600 times, underscoring the excessively high energy costs in the EU – ranging from two to even five timesthose in China and the United States.

The deteriorating state of the European economy is particularly evident in the economic conditions of Germany and France. In France, the budget deficit stands at 6%, while public debt has reached 123.7% of GDP (according to data as of 2024) (Bourgery-Gonse, 2024). Meanwhile, the German economy is in recession, having contracted for two consecutive years – by 0.3% in 2023 and 0.2% in 2024. This marks only the second such occurrence since the 1950s, with the previous instance taking place in 2002 and 2003. *The Economist* aptly captured the gravity of the situation, stating, "The German economy went from bad to worse" (The Economist, 2024d, pp. 62–64). In response to these challenges, Germany's newly appointed Chancellor, Friedrich Merz, has unveiled a comprehensive economic reform plan, including tax

[6] Volkswagen's 2024 announcement of the closure of three factories in Germany and the planned reduction of over 35,000 jobs by 2030 marks a symbolic and unprecedented event in the company's history (Kowalczyk, 2024).

cuts alongside reductions in social benefits, deregulation (particularly the repeal of environmental regulations introduced by the previous administration), an increase in the constitutional debt limit to stimulate public investment, and even the potential revival of nuclear energy. From a broader European perspective, at the beginning of 2025, the European Commission introduced a set of actions and projects to be implemented over the coming months (including the Competitiveness Compass) aimed at strengthening the EU economy's competitiveness and resilience in the evolving, also economically turbulent, global landscape that has been termed "the World 2.0".

4.2.2. EU Trade Wars With the US and China and the Impact of the US-China Confrontation on the European Economy

The European Union remains one of the world's largest trading entities, alongside the United States and China. Exports of goods from the EU account for approximately 15% of global exports, while imports represent around 14% of global imports. These figures highlight the EU's central role in the global economy, with the US and China as its most significant economic partners. In 2022, the United States was the EU's largest export market, accounting for 20% of total EU exports, while China was the EU's primary source of imports, constituting 22% of total EU imports. Through external economic instruments, such as free trade agreements, the EU exerts influence not only in economic affairs but also in the broader realm of international relations. Notably, the EU is a party to approximately 80 trade agreements currently in force (*Pozycja UE w światowym handlu: dane liczbowe*, 2018). Furthermore, as experts highlight, "although the share of external trade in the EU's GDP remains lower than in the People's Republic of China, it is still higher than in the US or Japan" (Makowska, Wąsiński, 2018). As a result, any factors that may adversely affect the EU's external trade are closely analysed at both the EU level and within its Member States.

In EU-US trade relations, the exchange of goods results in a trade deficit on the American side, exceeding EUR 150 billion[7]. However, the United States maintains a substantial surplus in trade in services with the EU, amounting to over EUR 100 billion. Consequently, the overall trade balance between the two economies is more balanced than often portrayed by the American side (particularly by President Trump).

[7] In 2023, the total value of goods exported from European Union Member States to the United States amounted to EUR 502 billion, while imports of goods from the US to the EU reached EUR 344 billion (Osiński, 2025).

In the era of Trump 2.0, all potential scenarios for the future of EU-US economic relations must be considered. Given this uncertainty, the Brussels-based think tank Bruegel emphasises in its study that "the EU should pursue a double strategy: on the one hand, offer Trump a deal to «facilitate» EU-US trade, as well as increase purchases from the US in certain sectors, while also preparing for the case that negotiations fail" (Packroff, 2024). A potential agreement could encompass increased EU imports of US liquefied natural gas (LNG), oil, and military equipment. The US is already the EU's largest LNG supplier, accounting for approximately 46% of European LNG imports. However, in line with Trump's transactional approach, should trade talks fail, the EU could impose retaliatory tariffs on US goods, applying higher rates proportional to the tariffs previously imposed by the Trump administration on EU products. Such a possibility was explicitly acknowledged by Commissioner Valdis Dombrovskis (Losik, 2025). Meanwhile, the authors of the aforementioned Bruegel report propose an even more assertive approach: "Instead of imposing tariffs on individual goods, the EU should prepare a 'negative list' that would introduce additional tariffs on all imports from the US, except on products that are crucial for the EU" (Packroff, 2024). Despite the tangible risk of deteriorating EU-US relations – both politically and economically, potentially escalating into a tariff war – analysts from major financial institutions forecast a steady, albeit modest, annual increase of 2% in trade between the two economies (Mazurkiewicz, 2025).

EU-China relations should be examined from two interrelated perspectives, namely, the bilateral dimension, and the broader context of US-China strategic rivalry. Geopolitically, the United States, much like in the political sphere, seeks to pressure European corporations into significantly reducing their economic engagement with China, particularly in high-tech industries, in accordance with its strategy of technological decoupling from Beijing. During President Biden's tenure, his administration imposed a ban on exporting the most advanced integrated circuits and the machinery required for their production to China. The European Union did not align itself with this decision. However, by 2023, the US had successfully persuaded the Dutch government to adopt similar restrictions – albeit unilaterally and not at the EU level. This situation arose because the Dutch company ASML holds a monopoly on the production of machines essential for manufacturing the most advanced integrated circuits. This case underscores how Sino-American rivalry has the potential to undermine the cohesion of the European Union. And just as the Biden administration did in the case of ASML, the Trump administration could go even further, "seeking to divide EU countries

and aiming to make agreements with individual states rather than with the entire Union" (Packroff, 2024). A report published by Institute Montaigne at the end of 2024 highlights this concern, stating that "cases where the US administration pressures its allies to adopt national (rather than EU-wide) policies toward China – allegedly for national security reasons – could serve as a bargaining chip for Trump" (Packroff, 2024) in bilateral negotiations with individual EU Member States.

Since the late 2010s, there has been a notable shift in the European Union and its Member States' approach toward the People's Republic of China. This change was formally articulated in a 2019 EU document, which identified China not only as a strategic partner but also as a competitor and systemic rival. These latter designations have increasingly shaped EU-China relations, particularly in the economic sphere, where the concept of derisking has emerged as a guiding principle. This trend has been further reinforced by the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war in Ukraine. "Although there are differences among EU Member States regarding the scope of derisking, the process is expected to continue" (Przychodniak, 2024). In an effort to reduce economic and resource dependencies (particularly on rare earth metals) the EU (EC along with its Member States) has pursued a combination of defensive and offensive policy measures. The former, "although (...) not explicitly directed at China, have been introduced largely in response to Chinese policies, which are perceived as a potential threat to the EU's security, including its economic security" (Przychodniak, 2024). Among the defensive measures adopted by the EU and the European Commission are investment screening mechanisms and regulations on foreign subsidies that distort the internal market (Szczudlik, 2024).

The European Union's decision in the autumn of 2024 to impose tariffs on electric vehicles (EVs) imported from China represents a significant offensive measure directly targeting Chinese production and exports. As Justyna Szczudlik notes, "this is a groundbreaking decision that suggests the EU is taking a confrontational stance toward the PRC" (Szczudlik, 2024). At the same time, as the researcher notes, the European Union "has drawn conclusions from the failure suffered in 2013, when it imposed low and, above all, delayed tariffs on Chinese photovoltaic panels. As a result, the European solar panel industry was eliminated by subsidised Chinese production" (Szczudlik, 2024). Notably, the EU's move to impose tariffs on Chinese EVs closely coincided with a similar decision by the US government, which introduced 100% tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles.

Although Olaf Scholz opposed imposing tariffs on Chinese EVs imported into the EU (primarily to protect the interests of German

automotive companies), Germany's broader stance on its relationship with China has undergone a noticeable shift. Since the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century, Germany has increasingly acknowledged China as a direct economic competitor. A pivotal moment in this evolving approach occurred in the spring of 2024, just before Scholz's visit to Beijing. When asked about the possibility of decoupling the German economy from China, he firmly rejected the idea but did not rule out derisking (The Economist, 2024b, p. 18). This statement marked a significant adjustment in Germany's position toward the PRC, reflecting deeper structural transformations in both economies. As *The Economist* observed, trade relations between Germany and China flourished throughout the second decade of the 21st century due to the complementarity of their economies; China imported German-manufactured goods, while Germany relied on low-cost Chinese products. However, this cooperative model has now reached its limits. At the start of the third decade, economic competition between the two countries has intensified, extending even into Asian markets (The Economist, 2024b, pp. 18–19).

Conclusions: Civilian Power in the Era of Power Politics. Which Model for the EU in Less Permissive Environments?

Hypothesis no. 1 has been positively verified. The world is undergoing profound transformations, and these shifts in international relations negatively impact the EU's position in global affairs (consequently, hypothesis no. 2 has also been positively verified). This conclusion is supported by the following premises:

- The European Union is a child of multilateralism and neoliberalism (1992), whereas the contemporary international order is moving towards bilateralism and power politics.
- The EU is a soft power, civilian and normative power, and not a hard power.
- The EU will never be very good at geopolitics. Its comparative advantage lies in its ability to resolve issues through fact-based dialogue and results-oriented negotiations.
- The EU's traditional business model is not fit for a world of power politics.

Furthermore, hypothesis no. 3 has also been positively verified. In light of these developments, the EU's primary role has shifted toward responding to external challenges, particularly those arising from the ongoing transformations in the post-1989 international order.

In light of the positively verified hypotheses, a fundamental question emerges: To what extent does the EU, as a soft and civilian power, possess the necessary instruments to shape and influence the World 2.0? The pandemic, the war in Ukraine and Trump 2.0 has highlighted the changes taking place in international relations. In this context, one must acknowledge the validity of the argument that "the EU as a soft power is a concept that belongs to the past, as it cannot ensure an international presence proportionate to the EU's gravity" (Papanikolaou, 2020). Joseph Nye, who coined the term "soft power", has argued that "the world needs a stronger and more effective Europe" (Bentzen, 2020).

This, in turn, necessitates, above all, the articulation of a clear and realistic objective. Member States should stop "(…) losing sleep over terminological issues" (Helwig, Sinkkonen, 2022, p. 19). The evolving international order underlines the pressure for the EU to adapt to new international realities. More than a decade ago, Zbigniew Brzeziński warned of these challenges in one of his final books, noting that "Europeans must take a close look at themselves and answer the question of where they will be in 40 years if current trends persist. What is needed now is a clear definition of Europe's interests – and its responsibilities. Europe must find a sense of purpose in an era where many circumstances will conspire against it" (Brzeziński, 2013, p. 176).

A few years ago, in one of its editorial comments, Le Monde warned the EU and rhetorically asked, "Where will its place be in the wake of global realignment (...)?". The final months of 2024 and the early weeks of 2025 have provided a clear answer: the emerging multipolar world of power politics is increasingly centred on dialogue among individual great powers, leaving little space for an entity like the EU. As a result, the Union is being pushed to the margins of global politics. More than five years ago, Zaki Laïdi observed: "In today's increasingly Hobbesian global environment, the EU can only survive if it enhances its external influence (to project power) – which is not easy for an entity founded on the rejection of power politics. (…) Europe must reestablish itself as a true global player, not by attempting to emulate a classic superpower, but rather by consolidating and deploying different types of power" (Kuźniar, 2022, p. 182). In discussing these various forms of EU power, it is worth citing Grevi, who aptly notes: "(...) on a strategic level, different dimensions of EU power – geopolitical, normative, and regulatory – are not alternative to each other but mutually-reinforcing pillars of Europe as a viable power in a highly competitive and contested world" (Grevi, 2023a, p. 6).

In power politics and a post-peace world, the EU needs unique action beyond current models/agreements. As Korniychuk aptly notes,"room

for neutrality or strategic ambiguity is rapidly closing" (Korniychuk, 2023, p. 8). In a more hostile geostrategic reality, the EU is required to adopt a more pragmatic approach. Grevi uses a compelling metaphor by writing: "the EU needs to make a decisive shift from firefighting (i.e., short-term and piecemeal approaches to crises and challenges) to forest management, deploying structural reforms and policies to strengthen its resilience and global leadership" (Grevi, 2023b, p. 108). In other words, "As a global power, the EU should combine elements of hard and soft power in order to respond to the challenges facing the modern international system" (Papanikolaou, 2020). This hybrid approach "is a more suitable concept for achieving European ambitions in the international scene" (Papanikolaou, 2020). The strategic use of both soft power and hard power resources is commonly referred to as smart power – an approach that seeks to maximise the effectiveness of available power instrument (Zawadzka, 2019, p. 12). Positioning the EU as a smart power not only demands greater assertiveness in international affairs but also necessitates the integration of resilience into its external policy. This raises a critical question: "How can Europe combine its soft and hard power resources to successfully translate them in smart power strategies that would enhance its role as a global actor?" (Irace, 2020).

This will require a deepening of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy and comprehensive economic reforms. In the realm of security and defence, EU Member States and the Union itself "need to be prepared for much more demanding tasks, in much less permissive environments, up to conventional warfare against large state powers" (Grevi, 2022, p. 106). At the same time, the question posed by *The Economist* in February 2024 remains highly relevant: "Can Europe defend itself without America?" (The Economist, 2024a, pp. 15–18). As of early 2025, the answer remains negative. Similarly, Jan Zielonka argues: "One can curse Trump, but the real question is whether there is a European alternative to an increasingly unreliable alliance with Washington. The EU is a military dwarf, and the Franco-British military alliance is still in its infancy" (Zielonka, 2025). What is already certain, however, is that the EU has committed to strengthening its military capabilities. While this will be a long-term process, it is set to accelerate – not only due to the policies of hostile states, often referred to as the "Quartet of Chaos", but also because of declining trust in the US among European partners. The Trump 2.0 effect has prompted the EU, along with broader Europe (including the UK and Türkiye), to pursue a strategy of security de-risking from the US. This does not imply the creation of an alternative to NATO, but rather a reinforcement of the European pillar within NATO and preparing for

a scenario in which US engagement in European and global security diminishes. Simultaneously, the EU is advancing its vision of European Union 4.0 – a strategy aimed at positioning the bloc as a leader in the ongoing industrial revolution while fostering a more deeply integrated market. This would enhance the EU's ability to compete effectively with other global powers.

The EU's strategy in this era of power politics and a post-peace world should be grounded in three fundamental principles: smart power, resilience and assertiveness – applied universally to both adversaries and allies. Mark Leonard captures this shift succinctly: "Rather than trying to lead a global resistance to Trump, Europeans should take responsibility for their own interests – and find ways of building new relationships in a more transactional world" (Ryncarz, 2025). In this context, the EU would do well to heed the principle articulated over 170 years ago by Lord Palmerston in his famous dictum: "We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow".

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